Weird Tales

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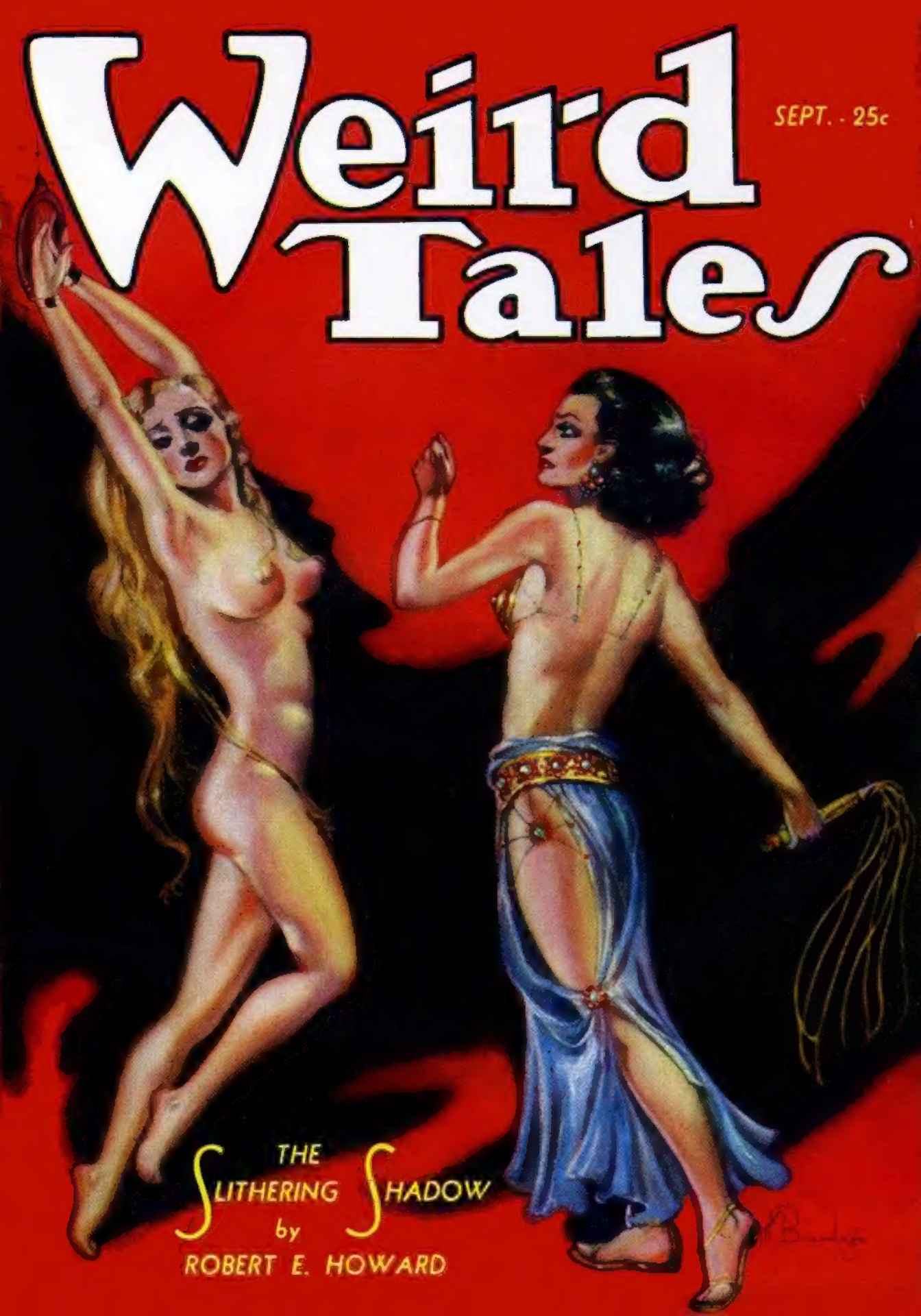

THE SLITHERING SHADOW
by
ROBERT E. HOWARD

"PSYCHIANA"

(*The New Psychological Religion*)

A new and revolutionary religious teaching based entirely on the misunderstood sayings of the Galilean Carpenter, and designed to show how to find and use the same identical power that He used.

FRANK B. ROBINSON, D. D.
Founder of "Psychiana." Author of "America Awakening" — "The God Nobody Knows," etc.

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Weird Tales

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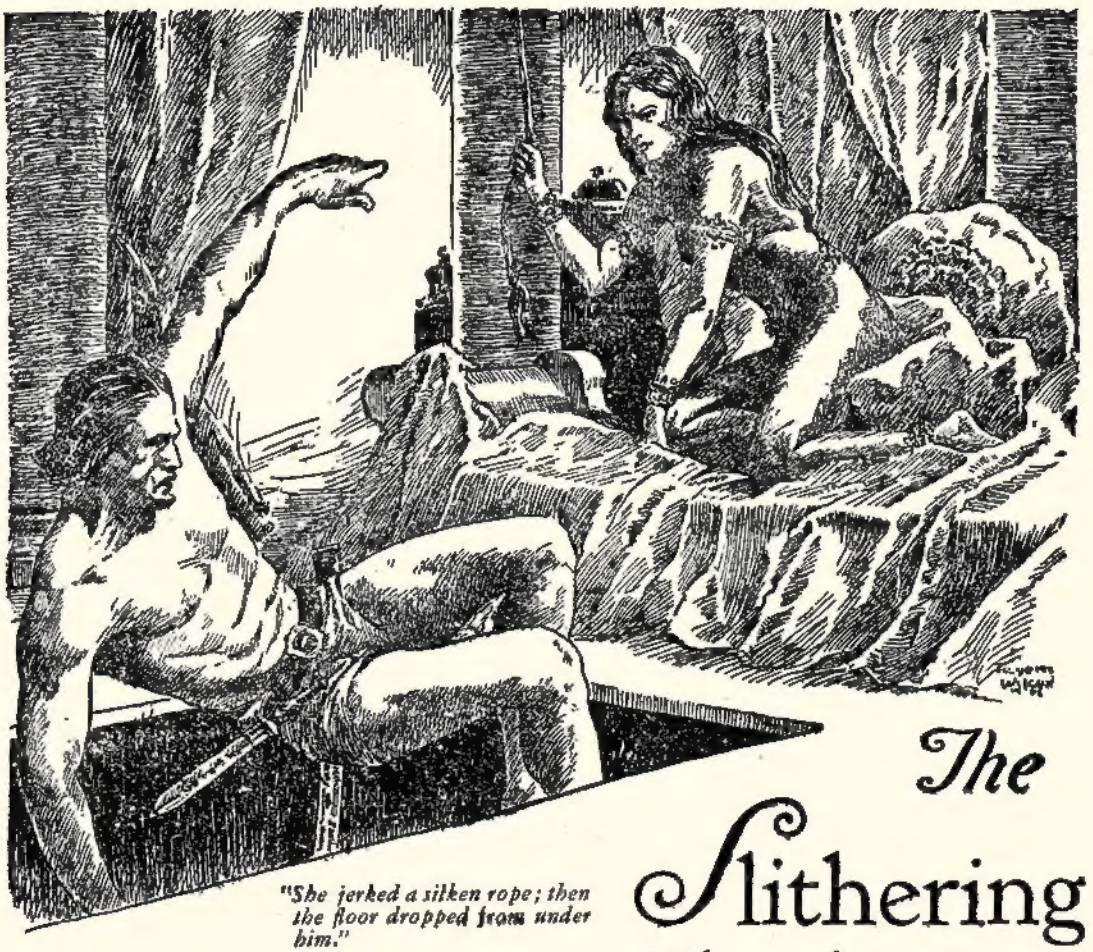


"She jerked a silken rope; then the floor dropped from under him."

The Slithering Shadow

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A mighty story of a barbarian adventurer, and the ravening monstrosity that slunk through the dark corridors of Xuthal in search of its human prey

THE desert shimmered in the heat waves. Conan the Cimmerian stared out over the aching desolation and involuntarily drew the back of his powerful hand over his blackened lips. He stood like a bronze image in the sand, apparently impervious to the murderous sun, though his only garment was a silk loin-cloth, girdled by a wide gold-buckled belt from which hung a saber and a broad-bladed poniard. On his clean-cut limbs were evidences of scarcely healed wounds.

At his feet rested a girl, one white arm clasping his knee, against which her blond head drooped. Her white skin contrasted with his hard bronzed limbs; her short silken tunic, low-necked and sleeveless, girdled at the waist, emphasized rather than concealed her lithe figure.

Conan shook his head, blinking. The sun's glare half blinded him. He lifted

a small canteen from his belt and shook it, scowling at the faint splashing within.

The girl moved wearily, whimpering.

"Oh, Conan, we shall die here! I am so thirsty!"

The Cimmerian growled wordlessly, glaring truculently at the surrounding waste, with outthrust jaw, and blue eyes smoldering savagely from under his black tousled mane, as if the desert were a tangible enemy.

He stooped and put the canteen to the girl's lips.

"Drink till I tell you to stop, Natala," he commanded.

She drank with little panting gasps, and he did not check her. Only when the canteen was empty did she realize that he had deliberately allowed her to drink all their water supply, little enough that it was.

Tears sprang to her eyes. "Oh, Conan," she wailed, wringing her hands, "why did you let me drink it all? I did not know—now there is none for you!"

"Hush," he growled. "Don't waste your strength in weeping."

Straightening, he threw the canteen from him.

"Why did you do that?" she whispered.

He did not reply, standing motionless and immobile, his fingers closing slowly about the hilt of his saber. He was not looking at the girl; his fierce eyes seemed to plumb the mysterious purple hazes of the distance.

Endowed with all the barbarian's ferocious love of life and instinct to live, Conan the Cimmerian yet knew that he had reached the end of his trail. He had not come to the limits of his endurance, but he knew another day under the merciless sun in those waterless wastes would bring him down. As for the girl, she had suffered enough. Better a quick painless sword-stroke than the lingering agony that faced him. Her thirst was temporarily quenched; it was a false mercy to let her suffer until delirium and death brought relief. Slowly he slid the saber from its sheath.

He halted suddenly, stiffening. Far out on the desert to the south, something glimmered through the heat waves.

At first he thought it a phantom, one of the mirages which had mocked and maddened him in that accursed desert. Shading his sun-dazzled eyes, he made out spires and minarets, and gleaming walls. He watched it grimly, waiting for it to fade and vanish. Natala had ceased to sob; she struggled to her knees and followed his gaze.

"Is it a city, Conan?" she whispered, too fearful to hope. "Or is it but a shadow?"

The Cimmerian did not reply for a space. He closed and opened his eyes several times; he looked away, then back. The city remained where he had first seen it.

"The devil knows," he grunted. "It's worth a try, though."

He thrust the saber back in its sheath. Stooping, he lifted Natala in his mighty arms as though she had been an infant. She resisted weakly.

"Don't waste your strength carrying me, Conan," she pleaded. "I can walk."

"The ground gets rockier here," he answered. "You would soon wear your sandals to shreds," glancing at her soft green foot-wear. "Besides, if we are to reach that city at all, we must do it quickly, and I can make better time this way."

The chance for life had lent fresh vigor and resilience to the Cimmerian's steely thews. He strode out across the sandy waste as if he had just begun the journey. A barbarian of barbarians, the vitality and endurance of the wild were his, grant-

ing him survival where civilized men would have perished.

He and the girl were, so far as he knew, the sole survivors of Prince Almuric's army, that mad motley horde which, following the defeated rebel prince of Koth, swept through the Lands of Shem like a devastating sandstorm and drenched the outlands of Stygia with blood. With a Stygian host on its heels, it had cut its way through the black kingdom of Kush, only to be annihilated on the edge of the southern desert. Conan likened it in his mind to a great torrent, dwindling gradually as it rushed southward, to run dry at last in the sands of the naked desert. The bones of its members—mercenaries, outcasts, broken men, outlaws—lay strewn from the Kothic uplands to the dunes of the wilderness.

From that final slaughter, when the Stygians and the Kushites closed in on the trapped remnants, Conan had cut his way clear and fled on a camel with the girl. Behind them the land swarmed with enemies; the only way open to them was the desert to the south. Into those menacing depths they had plunged.

The girl was a Brythunian, whom Conan had found in the slave-market of a stormed Shemite city, and appropriated. She had had nothing to say in the matter, but her new position was so far superior to the lot of any Hyborian woman in a Shemitish seraglio, that she accepted it thankfully. So she had shared in the adventures of Almuric's damned horde.

For days they had fled into the desert, pursued so far by Stygian horsemen that when they shook off the pursuit, they dared not turn back. They pushed on, seeking water, until the camel died. Then they went on foot. For the past few days their suffering had been intense. Conan had shielded Natala all he could, and the rough life of the camp had given her more stamina and strength than the average woman possesses; but even so, she was not far from collapse.

The sun beat fiercely on Conan's tangled black mane. Waves of dizziness and nausea rose in his brain, but he set his teeth and strode on unwaveringly. He was convinced that the city was a reality and not a mirage. What they would find there he had no idea. The inhabitants might be hostile. Nevertheless it was a fighting chance, and that was as much as he had ever asked.

THE sun was nigh to setting when they halted in front of the massive gate, grateful for the shade. Conan stood Natala on her feet, and stretched his aching arms. Above them the walls towered some thirty feet in height, composed of a smooth greenish substance that shone almost like glass. Conan scanned the parapets, expecting to be challenged, but saw no one. Impatiently he shouted, and banged on the gate with his saber-hilt, but only the hollow echoes mocked him. Natala cringed close to him, frightened by the silence. Conan tried the portal, and stepped back, drawing his saber, as it swung silently inward. Natala stifled a cry.

"Oh, look, Conan!"

Just inside the gate lay a human body. Conan glared at it narrowly, then looked beyond it. He saw a wide open expanse, like a court, bordered by the arched doorways of houses composed of the same greenish material as the outer walls. These edifices were lofty and imposing, pinnacled with shining domes and minarets. There was no sign of life among them. In the center of the court rose the square curb of a well, and the sight stung Conan, whose mouth felt caked with dry dust. Taking Natala's wrist he drew her through the gate, and closed it behind them.

"Is he dead?" she whispered, shrinkingly indicating the man who lay limply before the gate. The body was that of a tall powerful individual, apparently in his prime; the skin was yellow, the eyes slightly slanted; otherwise the man differed little from the Hyborian type. He was clad in high-strapped sandals and a tunic of purple silk, and a short sword in a cloth-of-gold scabbard hung from his girdle. Conan felt his flesh. It was cold. There was no sign of life in the body.

"Not a wound on him," grunted the Cimmerian, "but he's dead as Almuric with forty Stygian arrows in him. In Crom's name, let's see to the well! If there's water in it, we'll drink, dead men or no."

There was water in the well, but they did not drink of it. Its level was a good fifty feet below the curb, and there was nothing to draw it up with. Conan cursed blackly, maddened by the sight of the stuff just out of his reach, and turned to look for some means of obtaining it. Then a scream from Natala brought him about.

The supposedly dead man was rushing upon him, eyes blazing with indisputable life, his short sword gleaming in his hand. Conan cursed amazedly, but wasted no time in conjecture. He met the hurtling attacker with a slashing cut of his saber that sheared through flesh and bone. The fellow's head thudded on the flags; the body staggered drunkenly, an arch of blood jetting from the severed jugular; then it fell heavily.

Conan glared down, swearing softly.

"This fellow is no deader now than he was a few minutes agone. Into what madhouse have we strayed?"

Natala, who had covered her eyes with her hands at the sight, peeked between her fingers and shook with fear.

"Oh, Conan, will the people of the city not kill us, because of this?"

"Well," he growled, "this creature would have killed us if I hadn't lopped off his head."

He glanced at the archways that gaped blankly from the green walls above them. He saw no hint of movement, heard no sound.

"I don't think any one saw us," he muttered. "I'll hide the evidence——"

He lifted the limp carcass by its sword-belt with one hand, and grasping the head by its long hair in the other, he half carried, half dragged the ghastly remnants over to the well.

"Since we can't drink this water," he gritted vindictively, "I'll see that nobody else enjoys drinking it. Curse such a well, anyway!" He heaved the body over the curb and let it drop, tossing the head after it. A dull splash sounded far beneath.

"There's blood on the stones," whispered Natala.

"There'll be more unless I find water soon," growled the Cimmerian, his short store of patience about exhausted. The girl had almost forgotten her thirst and hunger in her fear, but not Conan.

"We'll go into one of these doors," he said. "Surely we'll find people after awhile."

"Oh, Conan!" she wailed, snuggling up as close to him as she could. "I'm afraid! This is a city of ghosts and dead men! Let us go back into the desert! Better to die there, than to face these terrors!"

"We'll go into the desert when they throw us off the walls," he snarled. "There's water somewhere in this city, and I'll find it, if I have to kill every man in it."

"But what if they come to life again?" she whispered.

"Then I'll keep killing them until they stay dead!" he snapped. "Come on! That

doorway is as good as another! Stay behind me, but don't run unless I tell you to."

She murmured a faint assent and followed him so closely that she stepped on his heels, to his irritation. Dusk had fallen, filling the strange city with purple shadows. They entered the open doorway, and found themselves in a wide chamber, the walls of which were hung with velvet tapestries, worked in curious designs. Floor, walls and ceiling were of the green glassy stone, the walls decorated with gold frieze-work. Furs and satin cushions littered the floor. Several doorways let into other rooms. They passed through, and traversed several chambers, counterparts of the first. They saw no one, but the Cimmerian grunted suspiciously.

"Some one was here not long ago. This couch is still warm from contact with a human body. That silk cushion bears the imprint of some one's hips. Then there's a faint scent of perfume lingering in the air."

A weird unreal atmosphere hung over all. Traversing this dim silent palace was like an opium dream. Some of the chambers were unlighted, and these they avoided. Others were bathed in a soft weird light that seemed to emanate from jewels set in the walls in fantastic designs. Suddenly, as they passed into one of these illumined chambers, Natala cried out and clutched her companion's arm. With a curse he wheeled, glaring for an enemy, bewildered because he saw none.

"What's the matter?" he snarled. "If you ever grab my sword-arm again, I'll skin you. Do you want me to get my throat cut? What were you yelling about?"

"Look there," she quavered, pointing.

Conan grunted. On a table of polished ebony stood golden vessels, apparently containing food and drink. The room was unoccupied.

"Well, whoever this feast is prepared for," he growled, "he'll have to look elsewhere tonight."

"Dare we eat it, Conan?" ventured the girl nervously. "The people might come upon us, and——"

"Lir an mannanan mac lir!" he swore, grabbing her by the nape of her neck and thrusting her into a gilded chair at the end of the table with no great ceremony. "We starve and you make objections! Eat!"

He took the chair at the other end, and seizing a jade goblet, emptied it at a gulp. It contained a crimson wine-like liquor of a peculiar tang, unfamiliar to him, but it was like nectar to his parched gullet. His thirst allayed, he attacked the food before him with rare gusto. It too was strange to him: exotic fruits and unknown meats. The vessels were of exquisite workmanship, and there were golden knives and forks as well. These Conan ignored, grasping the meat-joints in his fingers and tearing them with his strong teeth. The Cimmerian's table manners were rather wolfish at any time. His civilized companion ate more daintily, but just as ravenously. It occurred to Conan that the food might be poisoned, but the thought did not lessen his appetite; he preferred to die of poisoning rather than starvation.

His hunger satisfied, he leaned back with a deep sigh of relief. That there were humans in that silent city was evidenced by the fresh food, and perhaps every dark corner concealed a lurking enemy. But he felt no apprehension on that score, having a large confidence in his own fighting ability. He began to feel sleepy, and considered the idea of stretching himself on a near-by couch for a nap.

Not so Natala. She was no longer hun-

gry and thirsty, but she felt no desire to sleep. Her lovely eyes were very wide indeed as she timidly glanced at the doorways, boundaries of the unknown. The silence and mystery of the strange place preyed on her. The chamber seemed larger, the table longer than she had first noticed, and she realized that she was farther from her grim protector than she wished to be. Rising quickly, she went around the table and seated herself on his knee, glancing nervously at the arched doorways. Some were lighted and some were not, and it was at the unlighted ones she gazed longest.

"We have eaten, drunk and rested," she urged. "Let us leave this place, Conan. It's evil. I can feel it."

"Well, we haven't been harmed so far," he began, when a soft but sinister rustling brought him about. Thrusting the girl off his knee he rose with the quick ease of a panther, drawing his saber, facing the doorway from which the sound had seemed to come. It was not repeated, and he stole forward noiselessly, Natala following with her heart in her mouth. She knew he suspected peril. His outthrust head was sunk between his giant shoulders, he glided forward in a half crouch, like a stalking tiger. He made no more noise than a tiger would have made.

At the doorway he halted, Natala peering fearfully from behind him. There was no light in the room, but it was partially illuminated by the radiance behind them, which streamed across it into yet another chamber. And in this chamber a man lay on a raised dais. The soft light bathed him, and they saw he was a counterpart of the man Conan had killed before the outer gate, except that his garments were richer, and ornamented with jewels which twinkled in the uncanny light. Was he dead, or merely sleeping? Again came that faint sinister sound, as if some one had thrust aside a hanging. Conan drew back, drawing the clinging Natala with him. He clapped his hand over her mouth just in time to check her shriek.

FROM where they now stood, they could no longer see the dais, but they could see the shadow it cast on the wall behind it. And now another shadow moved across the wall: a huge shapeless black blot. Conan felt his hair prickle curiously as he watched. Distorted though it might be, he felt that he had never seen a man or beast which cast such a shadow. He was consumed with curiosity, but some instinct held him frozen in his tracks. He heard Natala's quick panting gasps as she stared with dilated eyes. No other sound disturbed the tense stillness. The great shadow engulfed that of the dais. For a long instant only its black bulk was thrown on the smooth wall. Then slowly it receded, and once more the dais was etched darkly against the wall. But the sleeper was no longer upon it.

An hysterical gurgle rose in Natala's throat, and Conan gave her an admonitory shake. He was aware of an iciness in his own veins. Human foes he did not fear; anything understandable, however grisly, caused no tremors in his broad breast. But this was beyond his ken.

After awhile, however, his curiosity conquered his uneasiness, and he moved out into the unlighted chamber again, ready for anything. Looking into the other room, he saw it was empty. The dais stood as he had first seen it, except that no bejeweled human lay thereon. Only on its silken covering shone a single drop of blood, like a great crimson gem. Natala saw it and gave a low choking cry, for which Conan did not punish her. Again he felt the icy hand of fear. On that dais a man had lain; *something* had

crept into the chamber and carried him away. What that something was, Conan had no idea, but an aura of unnatural horror hung over those dim-lit chambers.

He was ready to depart. Taking Natala's hand, he turned back, then hesitated. Somewhere back among the chambers they had traversed, he heard the sound of a footfall. A human foot, bare or softly shod, had made that sound, and Conan, with the wariness of a wolf, turned quickly aside. He believed he could come again into the outer court, and yet avoid the room from which the sound had appeared to come.

But they had not crossed the first chamber on their new route, when the rustle of a silken hanging brought them about suddenly. Before a curtained alcove stood a man eyeing them intently.

He was exactly like the others they had encountered: tall, well-made, clad in purple garments, with a jeweled girdle. There was neither surprize nor hostility in his amber eyes. They were dreamy as a lotus-eater's. He did not draw the short sword at his side. After a tense moment he spoke, in a far-away detached tone, and a language his hearers did not understand.

On a venture Conan replied in Stygian, and the stranger answered in the same tongue: "Who are you?"

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian," answered the barbarian. "This is Natala, of Brythunia. What city is this?"

The man did not at once reply. His dreamy sensuous gaze rested on Natala, and he drawled, "Of all my rich visions, this is the strangest! Oh, girl of the golden locks, from what far dreamland do you come? From Andarra, or Tothra, or Kuth of the star-girdle?"

"What madness is this?" growled the Cimmerian harshly, not relishing the man's words or manner.

The other did not heed him.

"I have dreamed more gorgeous beauties," he murmured; "lithe women with hair dusky as night, and dark eyes of unfathomed mystery. But your skin is white as milk, your eyes are clear as dawn, and there is about you a freshness and daintiness alluring as honey. Come to my couch, little dream-girl!"

He advanced and reached for her, and Conan struck aside his hand with a force that might have broken his arm. The man reeled back, clutching the numbed member, his eyes clouding.

"What rebellion of ghosts is this?" he muttered. "Barbarian, I command ye—begone! Fade! Dissipate! Fade! Vanish!"

"I'll vanish your head from your shoulders!" snarled the infuriated Cimmerian, his saber gleaming in his hand. "Is this the welcome you give strangers? By Crom, I'll drench these hangings in blood!"

The dreaminess had faded from the other's eyes, to be replaced by a look of bewilderment.

"Thog!" he ejaculated. "You are real! Whence come you? Who are you? What do you in Xuthal?"

"We came from the desert," Conan growled. "We wandered into the city at dusk, famishing. We found a feast set for some one, and we ate it. I have no money to pay for it. In my country, no starving man is denied food, but you civilized people must have your recompense—if you are like all I ever met. We have done no harm and we were just leaving. By Crom, I do not like this place, where dead men rise, and sleeping men vanish into the bellies of shadows!"

The man started violently at the last comment, his yellow face turning ashy.

"What do you say? Shadows? Into the bellies of shadows?"

"Well," answered the Cimmerian cautiously, "whatever it is that takes a man from a sleeping-dais and leaves only a spot of blood."

"You have seen? You have *seen?*" The man was shaking like a leaf; his voice cracked on the high-pitched note.

"Only a man sleeping on a dais, and a shadow that engulfed him," answered Conan.

The effect of his words on the other was horrifying. With an awful scream the man turned and rushed from the chamber. In his blind haste he caromed from the side of the door, righted himself, and fled through the adjoining chambers, still screaming at the top of his voice. Amazed, Conan stared after him, the girl trembling as she clutched the giant's arm. They could no longer see the flying figure, but they still heard his frightful screams, dwindling in the distance, and echoing as from vaulted roofs. Suddenly one cry, louder than the others, rose and broke short, followed by blank silence.

"Crom!"

Conan wiped the perspiration from his forehead with a hand that was not entirely steady.

"Surely this is a city of the mad! Let's get out of here, before we meet other madmen!"

"It is all a nightmare!" whimpered Natala. "We are dead and damned! We died out on the desert and are in hell! We are disembodied spirits—*ow!*" Her yelp was induced by a resounding spank from Conan's open hand.

"You're no spirit when a pat makes you yell like that," he commented, with the grim humor which frequently manifested itself at inopportune times. "We are alive, though we may not be if we loiter in this devil-haunted pile. Come!"

They had traversed but a single chamber when again they stopped short. Some one or something was approaching. They faced the doorway whence the sounds came, waiting for they knew not what. Conan's nostrils widened, and his eyes narrowed. He caught the faint scent of the perfume he had noticed earlier in the night. A figure framed itself in the doorway. Conan swore under his breath; Natala's red lips opened wide.

It was a woman who stood there staring at them in wonder. She was tall, lithe, shaped like a goddess; clad in a narrow girdle crusted with jewels. A burnished mass of night-black hair set off the whiteness of her ivory body. Her dark eyes, shaded by long dusky lashes, were deep with sensuous mystery. Conan caught his breath at her beauty, and Natala stared with dilated eyes. The Cimmerian had never seen such a woman; her facial outline was Stygian, but she was not dusky-skinned like the Stygian women he had known; her limbs were like alabaster.

But when she spoke, in a deep rich musical voice, it was in the Stygian tongue.

"Who are you? What do you in Xuthal? Who is that girl?"

"Who are you?" bluntly countered Conan, who quickly wearied of answering questions.

"I am Thalis the Stygian," she replied. "Are you mad, to come here?"

"I've been thinking I must be," he growled. "By Crom, if I am sane, I'm out of place here, because these people are all maniacs. We stagger in from the desert, dying of thirst and hunger, and we come upon a dead man who tries to stab me in the back. We enter a palace, rich and luxuriant, yet apparently empty. We find a meal set, but with no feasters. Then we see a shadow devour a sleeping

man——" he watched her narrowly and saw her change color slightly. "Well?"

"Well what?" she demanded, apparently regaining control of herself.

"I was just waiting for you to run through the rooms howling like a wild woman," he answered. "The man I told about the shadow did."

She shrugged her slim ivory shoulders. "That was the screams I heard, then. Well, to every man his fate, and it's foolish to squeal like a rat in a trap. When Thog wants me, he will come for me?"

"Who is Thog?" demanded Conan suspiciously.

She gave him a long appraising stare that brought color to Natala's face and made her bite her small red lip.

"Sit down on that divan and I will tell you," she said. "But first tell me your names."

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian, and this is Natala, a daughter of Brythunia," he answered. "We are refugees of an army destroyed on the borders of Kush. But I am not desirous of sitting down, where black shadows might steal up on my back."

With a light musical laugh, she seated herself, stretching out her supple limbs with studied abandon.

"Be at ease," she advised. "If Thog wishes you, he will take you, wherever you are. That man you mentioned, who screamed and ran—did you not hear him give one great cry, and then fall silent? In his frenzy, he must have run full into that which he sought to escape. No man can avoid his fate."

Conan grunted non-committally, but he sat down on the edge of a couch, his saber across his knees, his eyes wandering suspiciously about the chamber. Natala nestled against him, clutching him jealously, her legs tucked up under her. She eyed the stranger woman with suspicion and resentment. She felt small and dust-stained and insignificant before this glamorous beauty, and she could not mistake the look in the dark eyes which feasted on every detail of the bronzed giant's physique.

"What is this place, and who are these people?" demanded Conan.

"This city is called Xuthal; it is very ancient. It is built over an oasis, which the founders of Xuthal found in their wanderings. They came from the east, so long ago that not even their descendants remember the age."

"Surely there are not many of them; these palaces seem empty."

"No; and yet more than you might think. The city is really one great palace, with every building inside the walls closely connected with the others. You might walk among these chambers for hours and see no one. At other times, you would meet hundreds of the inhabitants."

"How is that?" Conan inquired uneasily; this savored too strongly of sorcery for comfort.

"Much of the time these people lie in sleep. Their dream-life is as important—and to them as real—as their waking life. You have heard of the black lotus? In certain pits of the city it grows. Through the ages they have cultivated it, until, instead of death, its juice induces dreams, gorgeous and fantastic. In these dreams they spend most of their time. Their lives are vague, erratic, and without plan. They dream, they wake, drink, love, eat, and dream again. They seldom finish anything they begin, but leave it half completed and sink back again into the slumber of the black lotus. That meal you found—doubtless one awoke, felt the urge of hunger, prepared the meal for himself, then forgot about it and wandered away to dream again."

"Where do they get their food?" in-

terrupted Conan. "I saw no fields or vineyards outside the city. Have they orchards and cattle-pens within the walls?"

She shook her head. "They manufacture their own food out of the primal elements. They are wonderful scientists, when they are not drugged with their dream-flower. Their ancestors were mental giants, who built this marvelous city in the desert, and though the race became slaves to their curious passions, some of their wonderful knowledge still remains. Have you wondered about these lights? They are jewels, fused with radium. You rub them with your thumb to make them glow, and rub them again, the opposite way, to extinguish them. That is but a single example of their science. But much they have forgotten. They take little interest in waking life, choosing to lie most of the time in death-like sleep."

"Then the dead man at the gate——" began Conan.

"Was doubtless slumbering. Sleepers of the lotus are like the dead. Animation is apparently suspended. It is impossible to detect the slightest sign of life. The spirit has left the body and is roaming at will through other, exotic worlds. The man at the gate was a good example of the irresponsibility of these peoples' lives. He was guarding the gate, where custom decrees a watch be kept, though no enemy has ever advanced across the desert. In other parts of the city you would find other guards, generally sleeping as soundly as the man at the gate."

Conan mulled over this for a space.

"Where are the people now?"

"Scattered in different parts of the city; lying on couches, on silken divans, in cushion-littered alcoves, on fur-covered daises; all wrapt in the shining veil of dreams."

Conan felt the skin twitch between his massive shoulders. It was not soothing to think of hundreds of people lying cold and still throughout the tapestried palaces, their glassy eyes turned unseeingly upward. He remembered something else.

"What of the thing that stole through the chambers and carried away the man on the dais?"

A shudder twitched her ivory limbs.

"That was Thog, the Ancient, the god of Xuthal, who dwells in the sunken dome in the center of the city. He has always dwelt in Xuthal. Whether he came here with the ancient founders, or was here when they built the city, none knows. But the people of Xuthal worship him. Mostly he sleeps below the city, but sometimes at irregular intervals he grows hungry, and then he steals through the secret corridors and the dim-lit chambers, seeking prey. Then none is safe."

Natala moaned with terror and clasped Conan's mighty neck as if to resist an effort to drag her from her protector's side.

"Crom!" he ejaculated aghast. "You mean to tell me these people lie down calmly and sleep, with this demon crawling among them?"

"It is only occasionally that he is hungry," she repeated. "A god must have his sacrifices. When I was a child in Stygia the people lived under the shadow of the priests. None ever knew when he or she would be seized and dragged to the altar. What difference whether the priests give a victim to the gods, or the god comes for his own victim?"

"Such is not the custom of my people," Conan growled, "nor of Natala's either. The Hyborians do not sacrifice humans to their god, Mitra, and as for my people—by Crom, I'd like to see a priest try to drag a Cimmerian to the altar! There'd be blood spilt, but not as the priest intended."

"You are a barbarian," laughed Thalis, but with a glow in her luminous eyes. "Thog is very ancient and very terrible."

"These folk must be either fools or heroes," grunted Conan, "to lie down and dream their idiotic dreams, knowing they might awaken in his belly."

She laughed. "They know nothing else. For untold generations Thog has preyed on them. He has been one of the factors which have reduced their numbers from thousands to hundreds. A few more generations and they will be extinct, and Thog must either fare forth into the world for new prey, or retire to the underworld whence he came so long ago.

"They realize their ultimate doom, but they are fatalists, incapable of resistance or escape. Not one of the present generation has been out of sight of these walls. There is an oasis a day's march to the south—I have seen it on the old maps their ancestors drew on parchment—but no man of Xuthal has visited it for three generations, much less made any attempt to explore the fertile grasslands which the maps show lying another day's march beyond it. They are a fast-fading race, drowned in lotus-dreams, stimulating their waking hours by means of the golden wine which heals wounds, prolongs life, and invigorates the most sated debauchee.

"Yet they cling to life, and fear the deity they worship. You saw how one went mad at the knowledge that Thog was roving the palaces. I have seen the whole city screaming and tearing its hair, and running frenziedly out of the gates, to cower outside the walls and draw lots to see which would be bound and flung back through the arched doorways to satisfy Thog's lust and hunger. Were they not all slumbering now, the word of his coming would send them raving and shrieking again through the outer gates."

"Oh, Conan!" begged Natala hysterically. "Let us flee!"

"In good time," muttered Conan, his eyes burning on Thalis' ivory limbs. "What are you, a Stygian woman, doing here?"

"I CAME here when a young girl," she answered, leaning lithely back against the velvet divan, and intertwining her slender fingers behind her dusky head. "I am the daughter of a king, no common woman, as you can see by my skin, which is as white as that of your little blond there. I was abducted by a rebel prince, who, with an army of Kushite bowmen, pushed southward into the wilderness, searching for a land he could make his own. He and all his warriors perished in the desert, but one, before he died, placed me on a camel and walked beside it until he dropped and died in his tracks. The beast wandered on, and I finally passed into delirium from thirst and hunger, and awakened in this city. They told me I had been seen from the walls, early in the dawn, lying senseless beside a dead camel. They went forth and brought me in and revived me with their wonderful golden wine. And only the sight of a woman would have led them to have ventured that far from their walls.

"They were naturally much interested in me, especially the men. As I could not speak their language, they learned to speak mine. They are very quick and able of intellect; they learned my language long before I learned theirs. But they were more interested in me than in my language. I have been, and am, the only thing for which a man of them will forego his lotus-dreams for a space."

She laughed wickedly, flashing her audacious eyes meaningly at Conan.

"Of course the women are jealous of me," she continued tranquilly. "They are

handsome enough in their yellow-skinned way, but they are dreamy and uncertain as the men, and these latter like me not only for my beauty, but for my reality. I am no dream! Though I have dreamed the dreams of the lotus, I am a normal woman, with earthly emotions and desires. With such these moon-eyed yellow women can not compare.

"That is why it would be better for you to cut that girl's throat with your saber, before the men of Xuthal waken and catch her. They will put her through paces she never dreamed of! She is too soft to endure what I have thrived on. I am a daughter of Luxur, and before I had known fifteen summers I had been led through the temples of Derketo, the dusky goddess, and had been initiated into the mysteries. Not that my first years in Xuthal were years of unmodified pleasure! The people of Xuthal have forgotten more than the priestesses of Derketo ever dreamed. They live only for sensual joys. Dreaming or waking, their lives are filled with exotic ecstasies, beyond the ken of ordinary men."

"Damned degenerates!" growled Conan.

"It is all in the point of view," smiled Thalis lazily.

"Well," he decided, "we're merely wasting time. I can see this is no place for ordinary mortals. We'll be gone before your morons awake, or Thog comes to devour us. I think the desert would be kinder."

Natala, whose blood had curdled in her veins at Thalis' words, fervently agreed. She could speak Stygian only brokenly, but she understood it well enough. Conan stood up, drawing her up beside him.

"If you'll show us the nearest way out of this city," he grunted, "we'll take ourselves off." But his gaze lingered on the Stygian's sleek limbs and ivory breasts.

She did not miss his look, and she smiled enigmatically as she rose with the lithe ease of a great lazy cat.

"Follow me," she directed and led the way, conscious of Conan's eyes fixed on her supple figure and perfectly poised carriage. She did not go the way they had come, but before Conan's suspicions could be roused, she halted in a wide ivory-chased chamber, and pointed to a tiny fountain which gurgled in the center of the ivory floor.

"Don't you want to wash your face, child?" she asked Natala. "It is stained with dust, and there is dust in your hair."

Natala colored resentfully at the suggestion of malice in the Stygian's faintly mocking tone, but she complied, wondering miserably just how much havoc the desert sun and wind had wrought on her complexion—a feature for which women of her race were justly noted. She knelt beside the fountain, shook back her hair, slipped her tunic down to her waist, and began to lave not only her face, but her white arms and shoulders as well.

"By Crom!" grumbled Conan, "a woman will stop to consider her beauty, if the devil himself were on her heels. Haste, girl; you'll be dusty again before we've got out of sight of this city. And Thalis, I'd take it kindly if you'd furnish us with a bit of food and drink."

For answer Thalis leaned herself against him, slipping one white arm about his bronzed shoulders. Her sleek naked flank pressed against his thigh and the perfume of her foamy hair was in his nostrils.

"Why dare the desert?" she whispered urgently. "Stay here! I will teach you the ways of Xuthal. I will protect you. I will love you! You are a real man: I am sick of these moon-calves who sigh and dream and wake, and dream again. I am hungry for the hard, clean passion of a man from the earth. The blaze of your

dynamic eyes makes my heart pound in my bosom, and the touch of your iron-thewed arm maddens me.

"Stay here! I will make you king of Xuthal! I will show you all the ancient mysteries, and the exotic ways of pleasure! I——" She had thrown both arms about his neck and was standing on tiptoe, her vibrant body shivering against his. Over her ivory shoulder he saw Natala, throwing back her damp tousled hair, stop short, her lovely eyes dilating, her red lips parting in a shocked O. With an embarrassed grunt, Conan disengaged Thalis' clinging arms and put her aside with one massive arm. She threw a swift glance at the Brythunian girl and smiled enigmatically, seeming to nod her splendid head in mysterious cogitation.

Natala rose and jerked up her tunic, her eyes blazing, her lips pouting sulkily. Conan swore under his breath. He was no more monogamous in his nature than the average soldier of fortune, but there was an innate decency about him that was Natala's best protection.

Thalis did not press her suit. Beckoning them with her slender hand to follow, she turned and walked across the chamber. There, close to the tapestried wall, she halted suddenly. Conan, watching her, wondered if she had heard the sounds that might be made by a nameless monster stealing through the midnight chambers, and his skin crawled at the thought.

"What do you hear?" he demanded.

"Watch that doorway," she replied, pointing.

He wheeled, sword ready. Only the empty arch of the entrance met his gaze. Then behind him sounded a quick faint scuffling noise, a half-choked gasp. He whirled. Thalis and Natala had vanished. The tapestry was settling back in place, as if it had been lifted away from the wall. As he gaped bewilderedly, from behind that tapestried wall rang a muffled scream in the voice of the Brythunian girl.

2

WHEN Conan turned, in compliance with Thalis' request, to glare at the doorway opposite, Natala had been standing just behind him, close to the side of the Stygian. The instant the Cimmerian's back was turned, Thalis, with a pantherish quickness almost incredible, clapped her hand over Natala's mouth, stifling the cry she tried to give. Simultaneously the Stygian's other arm was passed about the blond girl's supple waist, and she was jerked back against the wall, which seemed to give way as Thalis' shoulder pressed against it. A section of the wall swung inward, and through a slit that opened in the tapestry Thalis slid with her captive, just as Conan wheeled back.

Inside was utter blackness as the secret door swung to again. Thalis paused to fumble at it for an instant, apparently sliding home a bolt, and as she took her hand from Natala's mouth to perform this act, the Brythunian girl began to scream at the top of her voice. Thalis' laugh was like poisoned honey in the darkness.

"Scream if you will, little fool. It will only shorten your life."

At that Natala ceased suddenly, and cowered shaking in every limb.

"Why did you do this?" she begged. "What are you going to do?"

"I am going to take you down this corridor for a short distance," answered Thalis, "and leave you for one who will sooner or later come for you."

"Ohhhhhh!" Natala's voice broke in a sob of terror. "Why should you harm me? I have never injured you!"

"I want your warrior. You stand in my way. He desires me—I could read the look in his eyes. But for you, he would

be willing to stay here and be my king. When you are out of the way, he will follow me."

"He will cut your throat," answered Natala with conviction, knowing Conan better than Thalis did.

"We shall see," answered the Stygian coolly from the confidence of her power over men. "At any rate, you will not know whether he stabs or kisses me, because you will be the bride of him who dwells in darkness. Come!"

Half mad with terror, Natala fought like a wild thing, but it availed her nothing. With a lithe strength she would not have believed possible in a woman, Thalis picked her up and carried her down the black corridor as if she had been a child. Natala did not scream again, remembering the Stygian's sinister words; the only sounds were her desperate quick panting and Thalis' soft taunting lascivious laughter. Then the Brythunian's fluttering hand closed on something in the dark—a jeweled dagger-hilt jutting from Thalis' gem-crusted girdle. Natala jerked it forth and struck blindly and with all her girlish power.

A scream burst from Thalis' lips, feline in its pain and fury. She reeled, and Natala slipped from her relaxing grasp, to bruise her tender limbs on the smooth stone floor. Rising, she scurried to the nearest wall and stood there panting and trembling, flattening herself against the stones. She could not see Thalis, but she could hear her. The Stygian was quite certainly not dead. She was cursing in a steady stream, and her fury was so concentrated and deadly that Natala felt her bones turn to wax, her blood to ice.

"Where are you, you little she-devil?" gasped Thalis. "Let me get my fingers on you again, and I'll——" Natala grew physically sick as Thalis described the bodily injuries she intended to inflict on her rival. The Stygian's choice of language would have shamed the toughest courtezan in Aquilonia.

Natala heard her groping in the dark, and then a light sprang up. Evidently whatever fear Thalis felt of this black corridor was submerged in her anger. The light came from one of the radium gems which adorned the walls of Xuthal. This Thalis had rubbed, and now she stood bathed in its reddish glow: a light different from that which the others had emitted. One hand was pressed to her side and blood trickled between the fingers. But she did not seem weakened or badly hurt, and her eyes blazed fiendishly. What little courage remained to Natala ebbed away at sight of the Stygian standing limned in that weird glow, her beautiful face contorted with a passion that was no less than hellish. She now advanced with a pantherish tread, drawing her hand away from her wounded side, and shaking the blood drops impatiently from her fingers. Natala saw that she had not badly harmed her rival. The blade had glanced from the jewels of Thalis' girdle and inflicted a very superficial flesh-wound, only enough to rouse the Stygian's unbridled fury.

"GIVE me that dagger, you fool!" she gritted, striding up to the cowering girl.

Natala knew that she ought to fight while she had the chance, but she simply could not summon up the courage. Never much of a fighter, the darkness, violence and horror of her adventure had left her limp, mentally and physically. Thalis snatched the dagger from her lax fingers and threw it contemptuously aside.

"You little slut!" she ground between her teeth, slapping the girl viciously with either hand. "Before I drag you down the corridor and throw you into Thog's jaws,

I'll have a little of your blood myself! You would dare to knife me—well, for that audacity you shall pay!"

Seizing her by the hair, Thalis dragged her down the corridor a short distance, to the edge of the circle of light. A metal ring showed in the wall, above the level of a man's head. From it depended a silken cord. As in a nightmare Natala felt her tunic being stripped from her, and the next instant Thalis had jerked up her wrists and bound them to the ring, where she hung, naked as the day she was born, her feet barely touching the floor. Twisting her head, Natala saw Thalis unhook a jewel-handled whip from where it hung on the wall, near the ring. The lashes consisted of seven round silk cords, harder yet more pliant than leather thongs.

With a hiss of vindictive gratification, Thalis drew back her arm, and Natala shrieked as the cords curled across her loins. The tortured girl writhed, twisted and tore agonizedly at the thongs which imprisoned her wrists. She had forgotten the lurking menace her cries might summon, and so apparently had Thalis. Every stroke evoked screams of anguish. The whippings Natala had received in the Shemite slave-markets paled to insignificance before this. She had never guessed the punishing power of hard-woven silk cords. Their caress was more exquisitely painful than any birch twigs or leather thongs. They whistled venomously as they cut the air.

Then, as Natala twisted her tear-stained face over her shoulder to shriek for mercy, something froze her cries. Agony gave place to paralyzing horror in her beautiful eyes.

Struck by her expression, Thalis checked her lifted hand and whirled quick as a cat. Too late! An awful cry rang from her lips as she swayed back, her arms upflung. Natala saw her for an instant, a white figure of fear etched against a great black shapeless mass that towered over her; then the white figure was whipped off its feet, the shadow receded with it, and in the circle of dim light Natala hung alone, half fainting with terror.

From the black shadows came sounds, incomprehensible and blood-freezing. She heard Thalis' voice pleading frenziedly, but no voice answered. There was no sound except the Stygian's panting voice, which suddenly rose to screams of agony, and then broke in hysterical laughter, mingled with sobs. This dwindled to a convulsive panting, and presently this too ceased, and a silence more terrible hovered over the secret corridor.

NAUSEATED with horror, Natala twisted about and dared to look fearfully in the direction the black shape had carried Thalis. She saw nothing, but she sensed an unseen peril, more grisly than she could understand. She fought against a rising tide of hysteria. Her bruised wrists, her smarting body were forgotten in the teeth of this menace which she dimly felt threatened not only her body, but her soul as well.

She strained her eyes into the blackness beyond the rim of the dim light, tense with fear of what she might see. A whimpering gasp escaped her lips. The darkness was taking form. Something huge and bulky grew up out of the void. She saw a giant misshapen head emerging into the light. At least she took it for a head, though it was not the member of any sane or normal creature. She saw a great toad-like face, the features of which were as dim and unstable as those of a specter seen in a mirror of nightmare. Great pools of light that might have been eyes blinked at her, and she shook at the

cosmic lust reflected there. She could tell nothing about the creature's body. Its outline seemed to waver and alter subtly even as she looked at it; yet its substance was apparently solid enough. There was nothing misty or ghostly about it.

As it came toward her, she could not tell whether it walked, wriggled, flew or crept. Its method of locomotion was absolutely beyond her comprehension. When it had emerged from the shadows she was still uncertain as to its nature. The light from the radium gem did not illumine it as it would have illumined an ordinary creature. Impossible as it seemed, the being seemed almost impervious to the light. Its details were still obscure and indistinct, even when it halted so near that it almost touched her shrinking flesh. Only the blinking toad-like face stood out with any distinctness. The thing was a blur in the sight, a black blot of shadow that normal radiance would neither dissipate nor illuminate.

She decided she was mad, because she could not tell whether the being looked up at her or towered above her. She was unable to say whether the dim repulsive face blinked up at her from the shadows at her feet, or looked down at her from an immense height. But if her sight convinced her that whatever its mutable qualities, it was yet composed of solid substance, her sense of feel further assured her of that fact. A dark tentacle-like member slid about her body, and she screamed at the touch of it on her naked flesh. It was neither warm nor cold, rough nor smooth; it was like nothing that had ever touched her before, and at its caress she knew such fear and shame as she had never dreamed of. All the obscenity and salacious infamy spawned in the muck of the abysmal pits of Life seemed to drown her in seas of cosmic filth. And in that instant she knew that whatever form of life this thing represented it was not a beast.

She began to scream uncontrollably, the monster tugged at her as if to tear her from the ring by sheer brutality; then something crashed above their heads, and a form hurtled down through the air to strike the stone floor.

3

WHEN Conan wheeled to see the tapestry settling back in place and to hear Natala's muffled cry, he hurled himself against the wall with a maddened roar. Rebounding from the impact that would have splintered the bones of a lesser man, he ripped away the tapestry, revealing what appeared to be a blank wall. Beside himself with fury he lifted his saber as though to hew through the marble, when a sudden sound brought him about, eyes blazing.

A score of figures faced him, yellow men in purple tunics, with short swords in their hands. As he turned they surged in on him with hostile cries. He made no attempt to conciliate them. Maddened at the disappearance of his sweetheart, the barbarian reverted to type.

A snarl of bloodthirsty gratification hummed in his bull-throat as he leaped, and the first attacker, his short sword overreached by the whistling saber, went down with his brains gushing from his split skull. Wheeling like a cat, Conan caught a descending wrist on his edge, and the hand gripping the short sword flew into the air scattering a shower of red drops. But Conan had not paused or hesitated. A pantherish twist and shift of his body avoided the blundering rush of two yellow swordsmen, and the blade of one, missing its objective, was sheathed in the breast of the other.

A yell of dismay went up at this mischance, and Conan allowed himself a

short bark of laughter as he bounded aside from a whistling cut and slashed under the guard of yet another man of Xuthal. A long spurt of crimson followed his singing edge and the man crumpled screaming, his belly-muscles cut through.

The warriors of Xuthal howled like mad wolves. Unaccustomed to battle, they were ridiculously slow and clumsy compared to the tigerish barbarian whose motions were blurs of quickness possible only to steel thews knit to a perfect fighting-brain. They floundered and stumbled, hindered by their own numbers; they struck too quick or too soon, and cut only empty air. He was never motionless or in the same place an instant; springing, side-stepping, whirling, twisting, he offered a constantly shifting target for their swords, while his own curved blade sang death about their ears.

But whatever their faults, the men of Xuthal did not lack courage. They swarmed about him yelling and hacking, and through the arched doorways rushed others, awakened from their slumbers by the unwonted clamor.

Conan, bleeding from a cut on the temple, cleared a space for an instant with a devastating sweep of his dripping saber, and cast a quick glance about for an avenue of escape. At that instant he saw the tapestry on one of the walls drawn aside, disclosing a narrow stairway. On this stood a man in rich robes, vague-eyed and blinking, as if he had just awakened and had not yet shaken the dusts of slumber from his brain. Conan's sight and action were simultaneous.

A tigerish leap carried him untouched through the hemming ring of swords, and he bounded toward the stair with the pack giving tongue behind him. Three men confronted him at the foot of the marble steps, and he struck them with a deafening crash of steel. There was a frenzied instant when the blades flamed like summer lightning; then the group fell apart and Conan sprang up the stair. The oncoming horde tripped over three writhing forms at its foot: one lay face-down in a sickening welter of blood and brains; another propped himself on his hands, blood spurting blackly from his severed throat veins; the other howled like a dying dog as he clawed at the crimson stump that had been an arm.

As Conan rushed up the marble stair, the man above shook himself from his stupor and drew a sword that sparkled frostily in the radium light. He thrust downward as the barbarian surged upon him. But as the point sang toward his throat, Conan ducked deeply. The blade slit the skin of his back, and Conan straightened, driving his saber upward as a man might wield a butcher-knife, with all the power of his mighty shoulders.

So terrific was his headlong drive that the sinking of the saber to the hilt into the belly of his enemy did not check him. He caromed against the wretch's body, knocking it sidewise. The impact sent Conan crashing against the wall; the other, the saber torn through his body, fell headlong down the stair, ripped open to the spine from groin to broken breastbone. In a ghastly mess of streaming entrails the body tumbled against the men rushing up the stairs, bearing them back with it.

HALF stunned, Conan leaned against the wall an instant, glaring down upon them; then with a defiant shake of his dripping saber, he bounded up the steps.

Coming into an upper chamber, he halted only long enough to see that it was empty. Behind him the horde was yelling with such intensified horror and rage, that he knew he had killed some

notable man there on the stair, probably the king of that fantastic city.

He ran at random, without plan. He desperately wished to find and succor Natala, who he was sure needed aid badly; but harried as he was by all the warriors in Xuthal, he could only run on, trusting to luck to elude them and find her. Among those dark or dimly lighted upper chambers he quickly lost all sense of direction, and it was not strange that he eventually blundered into a chamber into which his foes were just pouring.

They yelled vengefully and rushed for him, and with a snarl of disgust he turned and fled back the way he had come. At least he thought it was the way he had come. But presently, racing into a particularly ornate chamber, he was aware of his mistake. All the chambers he had traversed since mounting the stair had been empty. This chamber had an occupant, who rose up with a cry as he charged in.

Conan saw a yellow-skinned woman, loaded with jeweled ornaments but otherwise nude, staring at him with wide eyes. So much he glimpsed as she raised her hand and jerked a silken rope hanging from the wall. Then the floor dropped from under him, and all his steel-trap coordination could not save him from the plunge into the black depths that opened beneath him.

He did not fall any great distance, though it was far enough to have snapped the leg bones of a man not built of steel springs and whalebone.

He hit cat-like on his feet and one hand, instinctively retaining his grasp on his saber hilt. A familiar cry rang in his ears as he rebounded on his feet as a lynx rebounds with snarling bared fangs. So Conan, glaring from under his tousled mane, saw the white naked figure of Natala writhing in the lustful grasp of a black nightmare shape that could have only been bred in the lost pits of hell.

The sight of that awful shape alone might have frozen the Cimmerian with fear. In juxtaposition to his girl, the sight sent a red wave of murderous fury through Conan's brain. In a crimson mist he smote the monster.

It dropped the girl, wheeling toward its attacker, and the maddened Cimmerian's saber, shrilling through the air, sheared clear through the black viscous bulk and rang on the stone floor, showering blue sparks. Conan went to his knees from the fury of the blow; the edge had not encountered the resistance he had expected. As he bounded up, the thing was upon him.

IT TOWERED above him like a clinging black cloud. It seemed to flow about him in almost liquid waves, to envelop and engulf him. His madly slashing saber sheared through it again and again, his ripping poniard tore and rent it; he was deluged with a slimy liquid that must have been its sluggish blood. Yet its fury was nowise abated.

He could not tell whether he was slashing off its members or whether he was cleaving its bulk, which knit behind the slicing blade. He was tossed to and fro in the violence of that awful battle, and had a dazed feeling that he was fighting not one, but an aggregation of lethal creatures. The thing seemed to be biting, clawing, crushing and clubbing him all at the same time. He felt fangs and talons rend his flesh; flabby cables that were yet hard as iron encircled his limbs and body, and worse than all, something like a whip of scorpions fell again and again across his shoulders, back and breast, tearing the skin and filling his veins with a poison that was like liquid fire.

They had rolled beyond the circle of

light, and it was in utter blackness that the Cimmerian battled. Once he sank his teeth, beast-like, into the flabby substance of his foe, revolting as the stuff writhed and squirmed like living rubber from between his iron jaws.

In that hurricane of battle they were rolling over and over, farther and farther down the tunnel. Conan's brain reeled with the punishment he was taking. His breath came in whistling gasps between his teeth. High above him he saw a great toad-like face, dimly limned in an eery glow that seemed to emanate from it. And with a panting cry that was half curse, half gasp of straining agony, he lunged toward it, thrusting with all his waning power. Hilt-deep the saber sank, somewhere below the grisly face, and a convulsive shudder heaved the vast bulk that half enveloped the Cimmerian. With a volcanic burst of contraction and expansion, it tumbled backward, rolling now with frantic haste down the corridor. Conan went with it, bruised, battered, invincible, hanging on like a bulldog to the hilt of his saber which he could not withdraw, tearing and ripping at the shuddering bulk with the poniard in his left hand, goring it to ribbons.

The thing glowed all over now with a weird phosphorous radiance, and this glow was in Conan's eyes, blinding him, as suddenly the heaving billowing mass fell away from beneath him, the saber tearing loose and remaining in his locked hand. This hand and arm hung down into space, and far below him the glowing body of the monster was rushing downward like a meteor. Conan dazedly realized that he lay on the brink of a great round well, the edge of which was slimy stone. He lay there watching the hurtling glow dwindling and dwindling until it vanished into a dark shining surface that seemed to surge upward to meet it. For an instant a dimming witchfire glimmered in those dusky depths; then it disappeared and Conan lay staring down into the blackness of the ultimate abyss from which no sound came.

4

STRAINING vainly at the silk cords which cut into her wrists, Natala sought to pierce the darkness beyond the radiant circle. Her tongue seemed frozen to the roof of her mouth. Into that blackness she had seen Conan vanish, locked in mortal combat with the unknown demon, and the only sounds that had come to her straining ears had been the panting gasps of the barbarian, the impact of struggling bodies, and the thud and rip of savage blows. These ceased, and Natala swayed dizzily on her cords, half fainting.

A footstep roused her out of her apathy of horror, to see Conan emerging from the darkness. At the sight she found her voice in a shriek which echoed down the vaulted tunnel. The manhandling the Cimmerian had received was appalling to behold. At every step he dripped blood. His face was skinned and bruised as if he had been beaten with a bludgeon. His lips were pulped, and blood oozed down his face from a wound in his scalp. There were deep gashes in his thighs, calves and forearms, and great bruises showed on his limbs and body from impacts against the stone floor. But his shoulders, back and upper-breast muscles had suffered most. The flesh was bruised, swollen and lacerated, the skin hanging in loose strips, as if he had been lashed with wire whips.

"Oh, Conan!" she sobbed. "What has happened to you?"

He had no breath for conversation, but his smashed lips writhed in what might have been grim humor as he approached her. His hairy breast, glistening with

sweat and blood, heaved with his panting. Slowly and laboriously he reached up and cut her cords, then fell back against the wall and leaned there, his trembling legs braced wide. She scrambled up from where she had fallen and caught him in a frenzied embrace, sobbing hysterically.

"Oh, Conan, you are wounded unto death! Oh, what shall we do?"

"Well," he panted, "you can't fight a devil out of hell and come off with a whole skin!"

"Where is *It?*" she whispered. "Did you kill it?"

"I don't know. It fell into a pit. It was hanging in bloody shreds, but whether it can be killed by steel I know not."

"Oh, your poor back!" she wailed, wringing her hands.

"It lashed me with a tentacle," he grimaced, swearing as he moved. "It cut like wire and burned like poison. But it was its damnable squeezing that got my wind. It was worse than a python. If half my guts are not mashed out of place, I'm much mistaken."

"What shall we do?" she whimpered.

He glanced up. The trap was closed. No sound came from above.

"We can't go back through the secret door," he muttered. "That room is full of dead men, and doubtless warriors keep watch there. They must have thought my doom sealed when I plunged through the floor above, or else they dare not follow me into this tunnel.—Twist that radium gem off the wall.—As I groped my way back up the corridor I felt arches opening into other tunnels. We'll follow the first we come to. It may lead to another pit, or to the open air. We must chance it. We can't stay here and rot."

Natala obeyed, and holding the tiny point of light in his left hand and his bloody saber in his right, Conan started down the corridor. He went slowly, stiffly, only his animal vitality keeping him on his feet. There was a blank glare in his bloodshot eyes, and Natala saw him involuntarily lick his battered lips from time to time. She knew his suffering was ghastly, but with the stoicism of the wilds he made no complaint.

Presently the dim light shone on a black arch, and into this Conan turned. Natala cringed at what she might see, but the light revealed only a tunnel similar to that they had just left.

How far they went she had no idea, before they mounted a long stair and came upon a stone door, fastened with a golden bolt.

She hesitated, glancing at Conan. The barbarian was swaying on his feet, the light in his unsteady hand flinging fantastic shadows back and forth along the wall.

"Open the door, girl," he muttered thickly. "The men of Xuthal will be waiting for us, and I would not disappoint them. By Crom, the city has not seen such a sacrifice as I will make!"

She knew he was half delirious. No sound came from beyond the door. Taking the radium gem from his blood-stained hand, she threw the bolt and drew the panel inward. The inner side of a cloth-of-gold tapestry met her gaze and she drew it aside and peeked through, her heart in her mouth. She was looking into an empty chamber in the center of which a silvery fountain tinkled.

Conan's hand fell heavily on her naked shoulder.

"Stand aside, girl," he mumbled. "Now is the feasting of swords."

"There is no one in the chamber," she answered. "But there is water——"

"I hear it," he licked his blackened lips. "We will drink before we die."

He seemed blinded. She took his

darkly stained hand and led him through the stone door. She went on tiptoe, expecting a rush of yellow figures through the arches at any instant.

"Drink while I keep watch," he muttered.

"No, I am not thirsty. Lie down beside the fountain and I will bathe your wounds."

"What of the swords of Xuthal?" He continually raked his arm across his eyes as if to clear his blurred sight.

"I hear no one. All is silent."

He sank down gropingly and plunged his face into the crystal jet, drinking as if he could not get enough. When he raised his head there was sanity in his bloodshot eyes and he stretched his massive limbs out on the marble floor as she requested, though he kept his saber in his hand, and his eyes continually roved toward the archways. She bathed his torn flesh and bandaged the deeper wounds with strips torn from a silk hanging. She shuddered at the appearance of his back; the flesh was discolored, mottled and spotted black and blue and a sickly yellow, where it was not raw. As she worked she sought frantically for a solution to their problem. If they stayed where they were, they would eventually be discovered. Whether the men of Xuthal were searching the palaces for them, or had returned to their dreams, she could not know.

As she finished her task, she froze. Under the hanging that partly concealed an alcove, she saw a hand's breadth of yellow flesh.

Saying nothing to Conan, she rose and crossed the chamber softly, grasping his poniard. Her heart pounded suffocatingly as she cautiously drew aside the hanging. On the dais lay a young yellow woman, naked and apparently lifeless. At her hand stood a jade jar nearly full of peculiar golden-colored liquid. Natala believed it to be the elixir described by Thalis, which lent vigor and vitality to the degenerate Xuthal. She leaned across the supine form and grasped the vessel, her poniard poised over the girl's bosom. The latter did not wake.

With the jar in her possession, Natala hesitated, realizing it would be the safer course to put the sleeping girl beyond the power of waking and raising an alarm. But she could not bring herself to plunge the Cimmerian poniard into that still bosom, and at last she drew back the hanging and returned to Conan, who lay where she had left him, seemingly only partly conscious.

She bent and placed the jar to his lips. He drank, mechanically at first, then with a suddenly roused interest. To her amazement he sat up and took the vessel from her hands. When he lifted his face, his eyes were clear and normal. Much of the drawn haggard look had gone from his features, and his voice was not the mumble of delirium.

"Crom! Where did you get this?"

She pointed. "From that alcove, where a yellow hussy is sleeping."

He thrust his muzzle again into the golden liquid.

"By Crom," he said with a deep sigh, "I feel new life and power rush like wildfire through my veins. Surely this is the very elixir of Life!"

He rose, picking up his saber.

"We had best go back into the corridor," Natala ventured nervously. "We shall be discovered if we stay here long. We can hide there until your wounds heal——"

"Not I!" he grunted. "We are not rats, to hide in dark burrows. We leave this devil-city now, and let none seek to stop us."

"But your wounds!" she wailed.

"I do not feel them," he answered. "It may be a false strength this liquor has given me, but I swear I am aware of neither pain nor weakness."

With sudden purpose he crossed the chamber to a window she had not noticed. Over his shoulder she looked out. A cool breeze tossed her tousled locks. Above was the dark velvet sky, clustered with stars. Below them stretched a vague expanse of sand.

"Thalis said the city was one great palace," said Conan. "Evidently some of the chambers are built like towers on the wall. This one is. Chance has led us well."

"What do you mean?" she asked, glancing apprehensively over her shoulder.

"There is a crystal jar on that ivory table," he answered. "Fill it with water and tie a strip of that torn hanging about its neck for a handle while I rip up this tapestry."

SHE obeyed without question, and when she turned from her task she saw Conan rapidly tying together the long tough strips of silk to make a rope, one end of which he fastened to the leg of the massive ivory table.

"We'll take our chance with the desert," said he. "Thalis spoke of an oasis a day's march to the south, and grasslands beyond that. If we reach the oasis we can rest until my wounds heal. This wine is like sorcery. A little while ago I was little more than a dead man; now I am ready for anything. Here is enough silk left for you to make a garment of."

Natala had forgotten her nudity. The mere fact caused her no qualms, but her delicate skin would need protection from the desert sun. As she knotted the silk length about her supple body, Conan turned to the window and with a contemptuous wrench tore away the soft gold bars that guarded it. Then, looping the loose end of his silk rope about Natala's hips, and cautioning her to hold on with both hands, he lifted her through the window and lowered her the thirty-odd feet to the earth. She stepped out of the loop, and drawing it back up, he made fast the vessels of water and wine, and lowered them to her. He followed them, sliding down swiftly, hand over hand.

As he reached her side, Natala gave a sigh of relief. They stood alone at the foot of the great wall, the paling stars overhead and the naked desert about them. What perils yet confronted them she could not know, but her heart sang with joy because they were out of that ghostly, unreal city.

"They may find the rope," grunted Conan, slinging the precious jars across his shoulders, wincing at the contact with his mangled flesh. "They may even pursue us, but from what Thalis said, I doubt it. That way is south," a bronze muscular arm indicated their course; "so somewhere in that direction lies the oasis. Come!"

Taking her hand with a thoughtfulness unusual for him, Conan strode out across the sands, suiting his stride to the shorter legs of his companion. He did not glance back at the silent city, brooding dreamily and ghostlily behind them.

"Conan," Natala ventured finally, "when you fought the monster, and later, as you came up the corridor, did you see anything of—of Thalis?"

He shook his head. "It was dark in the corridor; but it was empty."

She shuddered. "She tortured me—yet I pity her."

"It was a hot welcome we got in that accursed city," he snarled. Then his grim humor returned. "Well, they'll remember our visit long enough, I'll wager. There are brains and guts and blood to

be cleaned off the marble tiles, and if their god still lives, he carries more wounds than I. We got off light, after all: we have wine and water and a good chance of reaching a habitable country, though I look as if I'd gone through a meat-grinder, and you have a sore——"

"It's all your fault," she interrupted. "If you had not looked so long and admiringly at that Stygian cat——"

"Crom and his devils!" he swore. "When the oceans drown the world, women will take time for jealousy. Devil take their conceit! Did I tell the Stygian to fall in love with me? After all, she was only human!"

Nostalgia

By MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

There is a clang of gongs within my ears,
  A touch of lotus on my fingertips.
Dark slant-eyes stare behind my candid blue,
  And unknown accents tremble on my lips.

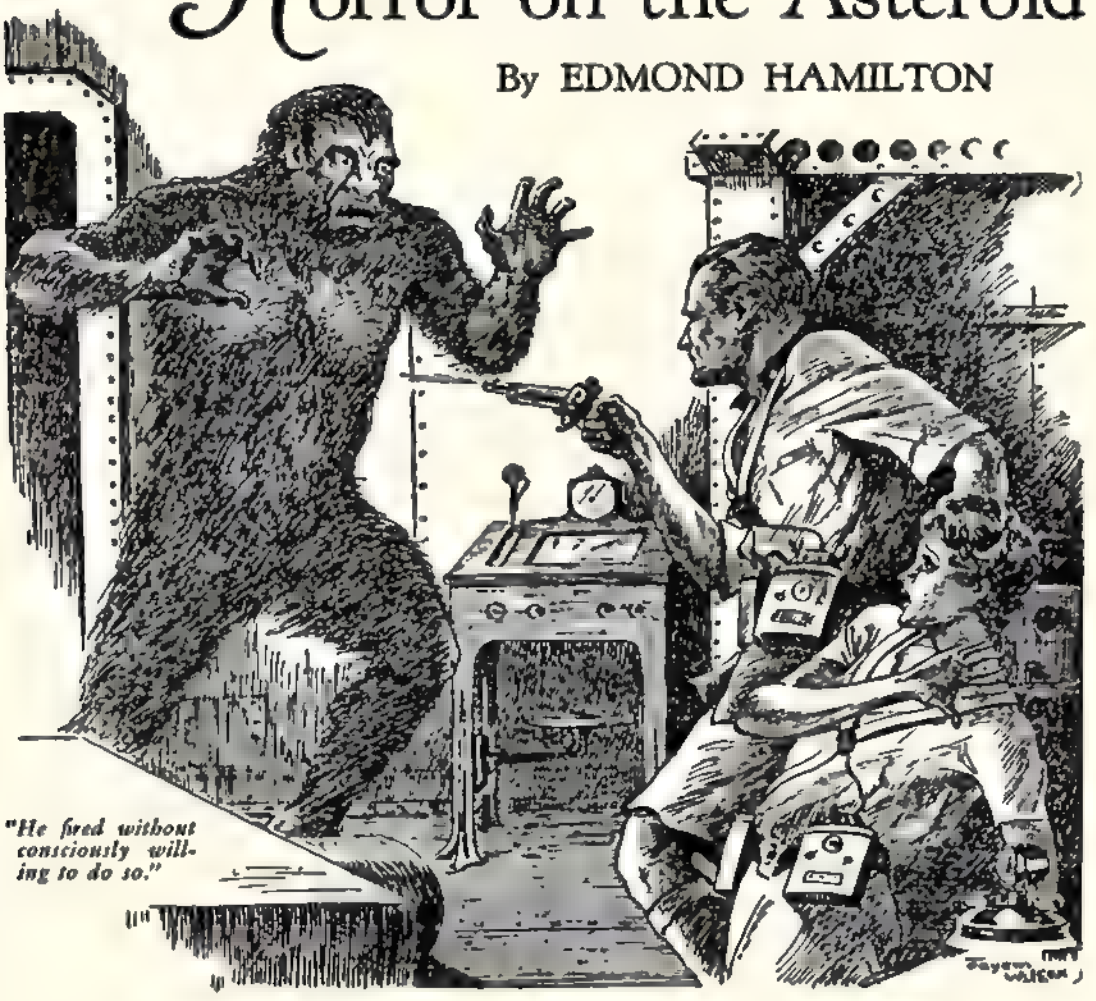
My heart-beats strangely quicken to the sound
  Of weird and whining music without tune.
I sometimes long for watered fields of rice,
  To see familiar corn beneath the moon.

What pagan taint of blood is in our line?
  What long-forgotten sire bequeathed to me
The memory of arched bridges o'er a stream
  Half choked with blossoms from a cherry-tree?

The white man's blood flows ruddy in my veins;
  My Saxon fathers knew this Saxon place . . .
Yet . . . *what is this calm squatting form I see?*
  A wisp of pungent smoke obscures the face . . .

The Horror on the Asteroid

By EDMOND HAMILTON



"He fired without consciously willing to do so."

A story of interplanetary space, and the weird fate that befell the passengers and crew of a space-ship that was wrecked by meteors

"LINER *Vulcan*, bound from Earth to Jupiter, calling all ships," tapped Jimmy Dane swiftly. "We have run into an uncharted meteor-swarm and fear that——"

Jimmy Dane was flung against the radio-room's wall at that moment as a terrific shock jarred the *Vulcan*. The great interplanetary liner spun dizzily in space, and then as the first thin cries of terror came from its decks and rooms, another terrific shock smote the ship and hurled Jimmy Dane along the floor.

He staggered up, the ship still rocking wildly. The radio-room was a wreck, the instruments smashed by the impacts. He could hear the nerve-chilling shriek of air rushing out into space from the lower decks, the slam of the air-doors between decks automatically closing, the

screams of passengers. Dane got the door open and staggered out onto the deck.

The *Vulcan's* upper deck was a scene of wild confusion and panic. Along its transparent-walled length chairs were lying in disorder, and the men and women passengers who had occupied them a moment before were staggering about in unreasoning panic. The gray-uniformed space-sailors among them seemed as dazed as they. The huge liner was still reeling, and though the outshriek of the air below had ceased, ominous cracking sounds could be heard.

Out of the panic-driven passenger mob a stern-faced man in gray officer's uniform fought his way to Jimmy Dane. It was Houston, the second-officer.

"Dane, two meteors of the swarm hit us!" he cried. "They smashed up both the middle and lower decks—Captain Rawlins and First-Officer Jackson were down there and killed with the rest."

"My God, is there any chance for those of us up here then?" cried Jimmy. "My instruments were wrecked by the shocks before I could finish my call."

"The automatic air-doors between decks closed in time and are holding this upper deck airtight," Houston cried, "but the ship can't hold together a half-hour! Dane, there's an uncharted asteroid we sighted to starboard just before we were struck—we've got to get these passengers into the life-boats and toward it before the ship breaks up."

He thrust a stubby rocket-pistol into Jimmy's hand. "I'm in command now that Rawlins and Jackson are dead, and I appoint you second in command. Shoot any one who disobeys orders—we've got to work fast!"

Houston spun about, shouted to the panic-stricken mob of passengers. "People, there's no further danger if you keep your heads!" he cried. "We're near an asteroid that has air, and we can make it in the life-boats.

"Kechnie—Drick—Cardell!" he called to the sailors. "Break open the life-boat ports. Get these people into the three starboard boats—women and children first."

"But my husband!" screamed a woman to Houston. "He was down in the middle deck! I've got to go down to him!"

"No one can go down to the two lower decks!" yelled Houston. "The air is gone from them and every one down there is dead. If we're not out of this in the life-boats before the ship breaks up we'll be gone too.

"Cardell, get those people away from the air-doors!" he cried. "Dane, take the stern end of the deck and take charge of Boat Three."

WITH Houston yelling orders at one end of the deck and Jimmy Dane at the other, the gray-clad space-sailors worked frantically to open the round ports leading into the cigar-shaped life-boats bolted to the *Vulcan's* side. Jimmy Dane's shouted commands could scarcely be heard over the din of screaming voices.

Most of the passengers were already pressing toward the life-boat ports, but some were fighting to get to the air-doors and reach the lower airless decks where some father or husband or wife lay dead. Jimmy Dane saw Cardell and his men fighting these back from the air-doors. Now some of the ports were open and women and children were pouring into the life-boats.

A prolonged and terrible cracking came from below as the shattered *Vulcan* sagged on through space. It was still rocking slowly from the shocks. Jimmy Dane expected that at any moment a crack would rive the upper deck's walls or roof and send its air shrieking out into

space. Through the deck's transparent walls the cold, brilliant stars of space looked in upon this mad scene of human wreck and terror and confusion as they had looked on many another.

The women and children now were all in the three big life-boats and at the commands of Houston and Cardell and Dane the men passengers were struggling through the ports into the boats. The sailors had stood aside, but now as more ominous crackings came from below a few of them pushed in toward the boat-port of Boat Three.

"Back there!" yelled Jimmy Dane to them. "Passengers first! Get back or I'll shoot!"

A big, brutal-faced sailor turned a fear-maddened countenance to Jimmy. "We're not going to be killed here to save a lot of blasted passengers!" he cried. "We're getting out while we——"

Flash! The soundless whip of flame from Jimmy Dane's rocket-pistol caught the man's arm and he reeled back from the boat-port. "Back from it!" Jimmy Dane warned them. "I'll shoot to kill next time!"

The sailors fell back, the male passengers crowding on into the life-boats. Some one pulled at Jimmy Dane's arm and he turned to find a stern-faced elderly man whom a girl was trying to drag into the life-boat.

"We can't go into this boat!" this man cried to Jimmy Dane. "It's too crowded and there are plenty of other boats down on the lower decks."

"We can't reach those," Jimmy told him. "Get in there before the two of you are thrown in!"

"You insolent pup!" stormed the other, forgetful of peril in his anger. "Do you know that I'm John Wentworth of Wentworth Mines? I say that my daughter and I won't go in this boat and——"

"Dad, we've got to go!" cried the girl. "We can't get down to the other boats now."

"But it's an outrage, Ann!" stormed John Wentworth. "No whippersnapper man can tell me——"

"Get in, you fool!" cried Jimmy Dane. "Kechnie, push these people into the boat! We've got but minutes left!"

Houston came running along the deck. All the passengers were now inside the three life-boats, only the gray-clad sailors and officers remaining in the deck.

"All right, men!" cried Houston. "I'll command Boat One, Cardell Boat Two, and Dane Boat Three. I'll give orders by space-phone. In with you now and cast loose at once. She's breaking up."

The men without need of further command leapt through the ports into the crowded boats. Jimmy Dane entered his with Kechnie, gave the command to close the boat's inner port. The interior of the thirty-foot cigar-shaped craft was crowded with passengers in all stages of panic. Kechnie spun the port shut.

Jimmy Dane saw Cardell entering the second boat and saw too that Houston, highest in rank, was last to leave the deck and enter Boat One. The ports of the two other boats were shutting now also.

Dane had pushed through the crowd in his craft to the small control-cabin at its prow. "All right, loosen the bolts!" he called back to the sailors.

The bolts which held the life-boat to the interplanetary liner's side were rapidly loosened with the wrenches that hung beside them for this emergency. Boats One and Two dropped away from the great liner's side as their fastenings also were released.

A tremendous cracking and crashing came from the *Vulcan* as Boat Three also

dropped away from it. Jimmy Dane pressed on the controls, and as the rocket-tubes at its rear blasted, Boat Three shot aside from the *Vulcan* into space, after the other two.

Jimmy Dane could hear the passengers crowded in his boat still in uproar, men talking hoarsely, excitedly, some one screaming. But all fell silent as through the life-boat's windows they watched the *Vulcan* drift onward. The great ship's inertia was carrying it toward the glowing white speck of Jupiter, on and away from the three hovering life-boats.

The *Vulcan,* drifting away in death, was a magnificent sight. Jimmy Dane and Kechnie watched, a lump in the radio-operator's throat despite himself. The *Vulcan,* pride of the Jupiter run—going to its death in the great gloom of space as many a mighty ship had gone before it. But this one, the *Vulcan,* carried down in its lower decks the stiff and frozen bodies of officers and men he had joked with not an hour before, drifting on with their ship in death.

THE silence that held the two men was unbroken by any of the passengers. In all the three life-boats they were watching, as the huge dark mass with its crown of light became smaller and smaller in the star-flecked void. Then they saw its lights wink out, could almost hear the crash of its last collapse.

"She's gone," said Kechnie huskily.

Dane nodded wordlessly and was turning to the passengers back in the boat when Houston's voice came from the space-phone.

"Boats Two and Three all right? All right, Cardell? All right, Dane? Very well, now listen to me, all you passengers.

"Our greatest danger is over now. You see that little spot of pale light over to the right? Well, it's an uncharted asteroid and it has an atmosphere. We can get there in these life-boats in about six hours.

"So we're heading toward that asteroid. Once there we can wait until relief comes, for relief-ships will be putting out in search of us as soon as it is found that something has happened to the *Vulcan.* There is therefore no cause for further fear.

"Cardell and Dane," Houston continued, "we'll head at once toward that asteroid, on acceleration-schedule 14. Keep on the schedule, so our three boats won't become separated in space."

Houston's boat moved a moment afterward, a soundless burst of fire showing from its stern tubes as it headed toward the asteroid's pale speck of light. Cardell's craft, Boat Two, followed quickly after, and as Jimmy Dane touched the firing-studs of his own boat, its tubes blasted also and it followed after the others.

The three craft, moving on the same acceleration-schedule, kept closely together as they shot on through space toward the asteroid. Jimmy Dane, satisfied as to their boat's progress, turned to look back into its interior.

The first panic of the crowded passengers had given place to a black gloom. A woman was crying hysterically for her children, caught in the middle-deck of the *Vulcan.* Two other women were trying to comfort her. A stony-faced man who looked at no one had lost his wife and daughter. Tragedy was intangible, concentrated, in the life-boat's thirty-odd passengers. Jimmy Dane felt it.

Jimmy saw the big sailor he had shot nursing his burnt arm, but apparently bearing no malice. Then he saw a man, John Wentworth, pushing through the other passengers toward the control-cabin. With him was his daughter Ann.

"I want to know what this Houston means by having us head toward an uncharted asteroid," John Wentworth declared. "Why don't we head for Jupiter?"

Jimmy Dane heard Kechnie snort. "We don't head toward Jupiter," he told the magnate, "because Jupiter is over thirty million miles away and our air wouldn't last us for a tenth of that distance."

"But why go to this God-forsaken asteroid?" John Wentworth demanded. "It looks to me like sheer stupidity—and it looks like stupidity to have run the ship into that meteor-swarm at all."

Jimmy Dane faced him squarely. "Look here," he told him, "that meteor-swarm was uncharted and nobody could have foreseen it. As it is, most of the *Vulcan's* officers and men are dead, so make no more cracks about them. We're going to this asteroid now, not because we want to but to save our lives."

"I'll certainly make a strong complaint when we reach Jupiter," said John Wentworth as he turned away. "I lost valuable papers in the ship and now I'm to be marooned on some asteroid while my business on Jupiter goes to pot!"

Ann Wentworth lingered as her father turned away. "Don't mind father," she told Jimmy Dane. "Neither he nor most of the passengers know much about space-travel, and they don't appreciate the real situation."

"They'll appreciate it before long," Jimmy told her grimly. "Getting to that asteroid doesn't mean our troubles will be over."

"What will it be like there?" she asked, but he shook his head.

"There's no telling, though since it has air it may have life of some kind. But the real question is how long we're to stay there."

"Why, won't the relief-ships be coming to search for us as Mr. Houston said?" asked Ann Wentworth, in surprize.

"They'll search, but how they're to find us if we're on an uncharted asteroid is a question. But don't say anything of that to the rest," he added hastily. "I don't want to worry them."

"I won't," she smiled. "And no matter what father says, I'm sure you're all doing the best thing possible."

Jimmy Dane's eyes followed her as she went back into the crowded life-boat after her father.

"A swell girl," the radio-operator commented, "though her father's not so hot. Can't endure to stay on this asteroid a few days, eh? He ought to be glad it was handy here for us to light on."

THE asteroid grew steadily in apparent size in the next hours as the three life-boats moved through space toward it. Houston's voice came each half-hour on the space-phone to assure himself that all was well in the two boats commanded by Cardell and Jimmy Dane. The passengers took courage from Houston's statement that soon they'd reach the asteroid and that then it would only be a matter of waiting for the relief-ships.

Those who were not touched by the tragedy of losing family or friends in the disaster became cheerful. Jimmy Dane heard their excited talk as they gazed ahead toward the asteroid's greenish disk of light, rapidly broadening in the star-gemmed void. He was glad that they kept up their spirits, anyway.

The asteroid grew from a disk into a green sphere, and Houston phoned that they would land upon its sunlit side. Kechnie estimated that it was a hundred miles in diameter, a pigmy world with a dense little atmosphere and a day and night due to its rotation. The three boats swept in together toward the sunward

side, with speed rapidly decreasing at Houston's orders.

They shot downward, and the asteroid's convex surface became concave under them. A whistling outside the boats showed they had entered its atmosphere. Its surface seemed entirely covered by a dense green forest, but at one place an outcrop of gray rock made a clearing in the vegetation. Houston headed the boats down toward this.

"Tests show atmosphere apparently breathable but with high chemical content of unidentified elements," Houston spoke. "Gravitometers show point one eight two six. All passengers and crew will adjust gravitation-equalizers to that figure."

"Point one eight two six for all equalizers," Jimmy Dane told the passengers and men in his boat, and all adjusted the flat belt-cases worn by every interplanetary traveller.

"We will land in the clearing below," Houston's voice continued from the space-phone. "Cardell and Dane with two men each will emerge from the boats after landing. No other crewmembers or passengers will emerge until permission is given."

The three boats swept lower toward the clearing, that rushed up at them like a bald gray patch in the dense green vegetation that swathed this little world. Dane's hands flew over the studs, blasting the boat's nose-tubes and bringing it to slower speed. It landed with the others in the clearing, with a soft bump and jar.

Jimmy Dane strode back to the lifeboat's port. "Kechnie, remain temporarily in command here," he said. "Urmson, you and Drick come with me. Here are rocket-pistols for you."

The port had been spun open, and there entered a flood of dank air that had a highly chemical odor, pungent and slightly irritating. There was also in the air a rank smell of vegetation. Jimmy Dane stepped out with Drick and Urmson, the two sailors, into the clearing.

Houston and two sailors were emerging from Boat One, a little distance away, and Cardell and two others from the other craft. All wore rocket-pistols. They met at the center of the clearing.

"Dane—Cardell—I'm glad we got here safely," Houston said quickly. "I was afraid we might become separated before we got to the asteroid."

"But now that we're here on the asteroid it doesn't seem any too encouraging, does it?" said Cardell.

They gazed about them. Around the clearing the dense green vegetation rose in an unbroken wall twenty feet high. It was vegetation of a highly unusual kind, great clump-like growths that bore no ordinary leaves or foliage or branches, but were simply branching trunks of solid green fiber. They were lower in the scale of plant-development than any vegetation these men had ever seen.

This thick forest of green trunks dripped constantly with drops of water that condensed upon them. There was no underbrush under them but a growth of primitive-looking lichens. The weak sunlight lay across this unusual forest's top but penetrated only here and there into the dripping green gloom of its lower levels.

There was no sound in the air save an occasional rustling breeze and the steady dripping. No living thing could be seen to move in the surrounding vegetation. The landscape of the asteroid was weird and depressing, and the rasping, irritating quality of the chemical-laden air drawn in with each breath did not improve matters. Jimmy Dane looked around with unusually strong feelings of oppression and irritation.

"Sure is a damned uncheerful place," said Cardell. "I hope we'll not be here long."

"That depends," said Houston, "on whether the relief-ships can find us. Jimmy, do you think that last call of yours got through to any one?"

Jimmy Dane shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "I'd hardly more than started it when the shocks came one after the other and wrecked the instruments. There's not much chance that any ship heard it."

"Then that means," said Houston, "that we'll be here until relief-ships come out after the *Vulcan* and find us. This being an uncharted asteroid, it may take them weeks or months to locate us. We'll have to make the best of it."

Jimmy jerked his head toward the lifeboats. "What about the passengers? They want out now."

Houston nodded impatiently. "We'll let them out and tell them what we're facing. Urmson, you go tell them they can emerge now. Cardell, you and Drick and Ames prod around the clearing to see if there's anything dangerous in these forests."

As URMSON turned to go, Houston suddenly uttered a sharp exclamation, pointed to a point in the surrounding wall of vegetation. "There go creatures of some sort—see!"

Jimmy Dane spun with the others and saw two large reptilian creatures that had skirted the clearing's edge running back into the vegetation. His short glimpse of them before they disappeared in the growths was enough to let him see that they were five or six feet in length and two feet in height, that their dark-green bodies ran on four legs with taloned claws, and that their heads were elongated and had jaws set with short, sharp teeth.

Then the scaled green bodies were gone in the weird forest's depths. Jimmy Dane had never seen such creatures, but had a momentary baffling sensation that they were somehow familiar. Somewhere he had read or heard of just such reptilian running things—but he could not place the memory and gave it up in disgust.

"Living things of some kind here, anyway," Cardell was exclaiming. "Do you suppose they'd be dangerous?"

"Don't look very prepossessing, but we have our rocket-pistols," Houston said. "Get going now, Cardell, but look out."

As Cardell and Drick and Ames started into the surrounding vegetation, Jimmy Dane motioned to the clearing's center.

"There are the passengers," he said, and with a nod Houston led the way toward the survivors of the *Vulcan*, about a hundred in number.

They stood in groups around the lifeboats from which they had just emerged, looking at the weird surrounding forest of the asteroid with some awe and doubt. As Dane followed Houston toward them, he noted John Wentworth staring about in evident displeasure and then making some remark to his daughter.

Houston faced the passengers, who had all turned toward him. "People, we've reached the asteroid and we may as well understand each other. No matter what conditions are like here we'll have to have some semblance of order, and for that reason I will remain in command with Mr. Dane and Mr. Cardell under me.

"I must ask you to obey all orders as given. Our first work will be to prepare these three boats so they can be used as quarters for the women and children. The men will sleep outside, and we will have a system of watches to prevent any unpleasant surprizes. We've already seen

forms of life here that might be dangerous, and there may be others. But if all goes well we'll have a relief-ship here before long and we'll all get off safely."

John Wentworth stepped forward. "Why should we passengers obey your orders now that the ship is gone? We're not in space now."

Jimmy Dane saw Houston's stern face contort with anger. "I say you'll all obey orders and you will!" the officer shouted angrily. "And I'll stand no more murmuring!"

Jimmy Dane's surprize at Houston's sudden unreasonably heated anger was mixed with dull anger of his own. He felt his temper flaring. "Why shout at people?" he snapped to Houston.

Houston turned on him. "Keep quiet, Dane!" he ordered savagely. "I'm running this!"

Jimmy Dane was sullenly silent. He saw the passengers looking in amazement at the two quarrelling officers. Ann Wentworth's face was astonished. Jimmy realized suddenly how strange it was for him and Houston, the best of friends, to be snapping at each other at this strained moment. What in the world was making them do so?

The weirdness of the asteroid's scene, the depressing surroundings of green leafless growths, the irritation of the chemical-laden air in their throats and lungs, these must be responsible, Jimmy decided. He and Houston couldn't quarrel now! Yet even as he resolved this, Jimmy was aware still of a dull animosity toward Houston that his reason seemed unable to smother.

CARDELL'S voice came suddenly from back in the vegetation. "Houston, I've found something!" he cried.

"All right, I'm coming!" Houston snapped. He hurried in that direction with Jimmy Dane following.

Jimmy saw that the passengers were streaming after them into the forest, too. But Houston did not bother to order them back.

The ordinarily capable Houston was showing a lot of weaknesses under the present strain, Jimmy decided. Then they reached Cardell and the two sailors, a few-score yards back in the vegetation.

Houston and Jimmy Dane stared, the passengers behind them peering also. It was a space-ship that Cardell had found, a corroded freighter lying almost hidden in the towering vegetation in which it had landed. Its whole stern was twisted and distorted as though by great forces. On the freighter's bows was the name, *Jackson N. Willings, Venus*. Its door was open but all inside it was as corroded and rusted as the exterior by the dripping of the vegetation around it. The green growths had sprung up around and over it since it had landed there.

"Tube-explosion in the stern," said Houston. "They must have had it out in space and managed to get in here and land. Any sign of the crew?"

Cardell shook his head. "No sign at all. But there's another back farther—there's another——"

Houston stopped his babbling with an angry exclamation. "Another what? Tell me what you're trying to tell me and don't stand there mouthing!"

"I was telling you!" flared Cardell heatedly. "There's another back farther in the growths."

Jimmy Dane wondered if their minds had not all been strained by the events of the last hours. Since they had landed on the asteroid their tempers seemed to have grown steadily shorter.

Houston plunged through the growths in the direction in which Cardell was pointing. The sullen-faced Cardell followed, and Jimmy Dane and some of the

passengers. They came in a moment upon another wrecked space-ship.

This was a much smaller one, a swift-lined craft that had apparently been a private space-yacht. Its bows were bent and crumpled and its name was not visible. It was much more corroded than the freighter, and there was no sign of its occupants either.

"It's been here longer than the other, by a good bit," Houston said. "Probably there are other wrecks on this asteroid, other ships that had trouble in space but managed to get here."

"But where are their crews and passengers then?" Jimmy Dane demanded. "We've not seen a living soul."

"How should I know where they are?" Houston countered angrily. "What's the matter with you anyway, Dane?"

"What's the matter with you?" returned Jimmy Dane fiercely. "I don't have to stand for your orders if I don't like them——"

His fists had clenched, and Houston's face was livid with equal anger when Ann Wentworth stepped between the two men. Amazement and horror were on her face, and on those of the watching passengers.

"Are you two crazy?" she cried. "What's happened to you? For the last half-hour you've been at each other's throats!"

Realization struggled through the sullen fury on Houston's face. "By heaven, it is unbelievable, the way we've changed in the last half-hour!" he exclaimed. "Do you suppose——"

"Look! Look there!" came a scream from one of the passengers. He was pointing into the vegetation.

A group of strange creatures was advancing slowly through the growths toward the humans. There were nine or ten of the things and they were hairy, ape-like animals of about human size, walking on their hind limbs, with the frequent aid of their elongated front ones. The masses of hair that grew on their heads as on their bodies hid all of their faces except the dark bright eyes and the protruding jaws.

They were uttering chattering, barking sounds as they advanced, and in their noisy progress was no attempt at concealment. When they saw the humans turn toward them they stopped, a dozen feet away in the vegetation, and returned their gaze. There was something disconcerting in the bright-eyed, fixed stare of these ape-creatures.

"Get back to the clearing, all you passengers!" yelled Houston. "They may attack us!"

Cardell uttered a shrill, senseless laugh. "They won't attack *me!*" he exclaimed and fired point-blank at the creatures.

His pistol's flash seared the side of one, and the creature uttered a piercing cry of rage. It and the others hastily retreated.

"Damn you, I didn't tell you to fire!" Houston cried and with a furious blow knocked Cardell staggering.

Cardell got to his feet with an animal-like snarl of rage, but before he could spring at Houston, Jimmy Dane caught him.

"Not now!" Jimmy cried. "It's no time for fighting now!"

Jimmy felt a desire to strangle Cardell, so hot was his own anger against him and Houston at the moment. But his reason conquered enough to make him see that they could not fight among themselves at this moment.

The hairy ape-things had disappeared back in the vegetation, though their shrill cries of rage could still be heard. The passengers were streaming hastily back toward the clearing where were the life-

boats, and Houston and Cardell and Jimmy followed.

Houston in loud tones ordered the women and children to retire into the life-boats. He then divided the sailors into watches to guard the camp from surprize, he to head one watch, Cardell the second and Jimmy Dane the third.

WHEN Houston ordered the sailor Urmson to take his post in the first watch, Urmson replied only by a defiant snarl. With a bellow of fury Houston sprang toward the man and would have beaten him senseless had not Jimmy Dane and another sailor pulled him off. The other men and the passengers watched apathetically. Were they all going crazy, Jimmy asked himself?

He had further occasion to ask himself the question in the next few hours. It was as though a germ of insanity was spreading through the little encampment. The tempers of passengers and sailors alike had become suddenly explosive, it seemed. There were two fights among the male passengers, in one of which a half-dozen of them participated. Houston broke up both battles by rushing roaring into the combat and striking right and left until the fighters separated.

There was even a quarrel and fight among the women in the life-boats. There came shrill cries from them until the quarrel suddenly ended. Cardell and others of the men outside began laughing when they heard. With a shock Jimmy Dane realized that he too was laughing. What was the matter with him, anyway?

Night was striding swiftly across the asteroid's surface, the little world's period of rotation being small. The sun plummeted down with amazing speed behind the horizon, and the stars blazed forth silently to illuminate everything with their clear light. The metal life-boats glittered beneath it, the towering vegetation reared in a dark solid wall around the clearing.

Houston's watch ended and Cardell began his. By then the women in the life-boats were sleeping, and most of the men slept also around the fires they had kindled outside. Jimmy Dane, still awake, saw suddenly that Cardell too was stretched sleeping, completely oblivious to his duty as head of that watch. With a snarl of anger Jimmy strode to him and shook him, but Cardell, half waking, thrust him away and sank back again.

For a moment Dane's hot anger made him want to beat the sleeping man into a pulp. He straightened, looking about the starlit clearing. The other sailors named for that watch were stretched in careless slumber also. A few hours before they would not even have dreamt of doing such a thing. But all ordinary discipline seemed vanishing in the creeping madness that had apparently taken hold of them since they landed on the asteroid.

Jimmy Dane's head ached badly and each breath of the pungent, chemical-smelling air seemed to burn his lungs and cloud his brain. Over the anger he felt toward the others and his dull apathy toward their fate, there persisted the thought that some one had to keep watch. He walked slowly around the clearing, casting an eye toward the dark forest of towering growths.

He heard distant sounds, shrill cries that must come from some of the ape-creatures they had seen. There were hoarse, booming calls now and then, too. Could those be from the other things they had glimpsed shortly after landing? What had they been?—Jimmy found his memory functioning badly—two things that had run away into the growths, reptilian shapes . . .

He heard some one come out of one of

the life-boats and approach him. It was Ann Wentworth.

"What are you doing out here?" he demanded. "Go back into the boat."

"I won't!" she snapped, her voice rising to an angry scream. "I won't!"

Then suddenly her voice dropped, her white face was changed and serious. "Jimmy, are we all going insane?" she cried. "What's happening to us all to make us like this?"

"I don't know," Jimmy Dane muttered, passing a hand over his brow. "I've been trying to think—we've all changed——"

"Ever since we landed on this asteroid!" she exclaimed. "Something's been making us more and more irrational and short-tempered!"

"There must be something about this place we don't know," he said dully. "If we could find the men who were in those wrecked ships—there must be some of them still alive here——"

"Let's go back to the wrecks and see if we can find any trace of them!" Ann Wentworth exclaimed.

Jimmy Dane stared at her. He felt somehow that the idea was irrational, that if the men had not been at the wrecks that afternoon they would not be now. But his slow-working brain could not place the idea's wrongness and he gave it up. "All right," he said. "Come on."

Without hesitation he started into the dark vegetation. Ann Wentworth hastened beside him.

THE forests of towering growths were weird in the darkness, dappled here and there by patches of starlight that sifted through the tangle of monstrous trunks.

The girl beside him tripped upon a projecting root, and in swift unreasoning anger she turned and kicked it. This struck Dane as funny, nd he uttered a senseless laugh.

"Jimmy, come on!" Ann almost sobbed. "We're getting worse, somehow."

They plodded through the great growths until their progress was halted by the looming metal bulk of the wrecked freighter. As they came out of the vegetation onto it they saw a dark, hairy shape swing out of its door and into the growths, without seeing them.

"One of the ape-things!" Ann Wentworth exclaimed.

"They seem to haunt this wreck—I wonder why," Jimmy muttered. "There may be more inside."

But when they went closer to the door and listened they heard no sound from inside the wreck. Jimmy stared stupidly into its dark interior.

"What did we come here for?" he said. "We were looking for something—but what?"

"How should I know what?" said Ann.

"It was your idea," he started to say wrathfully, and then with a strong effort controlled himself. "No—no fighting now. We'll look through it."

They found the interior of the wreck not completely dark, for shafts of starlight entered through its window-ports. They fumbled through the corroded fuel-tanks and firing-mechanisms in the lower deck, climbed up to the middle deck. This, the freighter's cargo-deck, was filled with heavy metal cases.

Ann wandered up the stair to the upper deck, and Jimmy followed. The patches of starlight showed that this deck had been occupied by men since the freighter had landed on the asteroid. There were cots and blankets, now in hopeless disorder.

"The ship's crew must have lived here for a while," he said. "Then something

happened to them—maybe those ape-things or other things got them——"

"Jimmy, I found something!" came Ann's exclamation, shrill with excitement.

She was in the navigation-room opening at the front of the deck, and Jimmy found her with a thick leather-covered book in her hand.

"It was on the desk—I think it's the ship's log!" the girl told him. "It might give some clue to what happened."

"Give it to me!" Jimmy snatched it bruskly from her hand, walked over to one of the navigation-room's windows and opened the log-book in the clear starlight from the window.

He stared at the pages of neat handwriting riffling beneath his fingers. The words, the letters, were perfectly familiar in appearance, but Jimmy found them oddly hard to read. It was as though his brain found difficulty in connecting the written words with ideas.

"What does it say?" asked Ann impatiently.

"Wait—I'll read it." Jimmy with a strong mental effort deciphered the meaning of the words as he read them aloud.

"*June 14.* Fourth day out from Jupiter on our return voyage. The course we are following ought to bring us to Venus in six weeks. We'll have to put on unusual speed, though, to get by the worst of the meteor zones between here and the orbit of Mars. But the old *Jackson N. Willings* can make it. . . .

"Nothing in that," grunted Jimmy, turning the pages. "Here's something!

"*July 9.* Disaster has struck us. We had been putting on extra speed for the last few weeks in order to clear the meteor zones, and our firing-tubes could not stand the strain, apparently. Four hours ago two of the stern tubes back-blasted suddenly and wrecked the rear part of the lower deck. Barrett, the second-officer, and six tube-men and two cargo-men were instantly killed. I, Captain Thomas Harkenson, with First-Officer Manning and the other nineteen members of the crew, were in the upper and middle decks and so escaped. Air-doors are all holding, but we are drifting helplessly in space and as we have no power to operate our radio-set, can't broadcast our plight.

"*JULY 11.* It has become apparent that the *Jackson N. Willings* is not drifting toward Mars as we thought, but toward an asteroid. As our charts show no asteroid in this position it must be one hitherto undiscovered. Manning and I made observations on it, and we find that it has an atmosphere; so if we land safely upon it we will have some hope of survival. We all feel very much more cheerful.

"*July 12.* Drifting nearer to the asteroid.

"*July 13.* Drifting nearer to the asteroid. Should reach it tomorrow.

July 14. Two hours ago the *Jackson N. Willings* reached this uncharted asteroid. The ship drifted in around it in a decreasing spiral and finally crashed onto the surface in a forest of dense green vegetation that apparently covers the whole sphere. Due to the low gravitational attraction of this little world, we did not crash with much force, and though the ship was wrecked further none of us was killed or badly injured by the shock. We have found that we are not the first to reach this asteroid, for very near where our ship crashed is another space-ship, a small yacht, that was apparently wrecked in much the same way as ours. There is no sign of its occupants, but they must be living somewhere on the asteroid. Our prospects are not very encouraging, for there does not seem to be much in the

way of animal life on this little world. The atmosphere is heavily impregnated with elements we can not identify and is very irritating to breathe. But we are still alive, and that is much.

"*July 15.* Things going very badly—we have been fighting among ourselves almost since the time we landed here, not twenty hours ago. One would think reason had deserted us by the way in which we snarl and strike at each other. Manning almost killed one of the sailors in a fight, and I regret to confess that I, Captain Harkenson, instead of stopping these fights, have taken part in them. God knows what madness has seized upon us, for our position here is very precarious. We searched for the yacht's people, but found none of them. We did find another wrecked ship, though, a small freighter named the *Alice N.*, some distance away in the forest. But there is no sign of its crew either—I am beginning to fear that there is some thing or things on this asteroid that takes toll of those who land upon it. But what? We have seen living creatures here, it is true, of several kinds. There are some ape-like, hairy beasts who watch us from a distance, a half-dozen in number. There are also some reptilian creatures of considerable size. Manning also reported that in the forest he found a small lake or pool in which some curious amphibious creatures lived. But none of these things seem formidable enough to have done away with the people of the two space-ships who landed here before us. But enough—my head is aching and I find it somehow hard to write.

"*July 16.* Very hard to write now—my thoughts are not coherent and I don't seem entirely able to put down my ideas in words. A sign of my brain giving, I suppose—but then madness is rife among us now. Less than two days here, and from a clean company of officers and space-sailors we have become a pack of snarling brutes. Two of us dead already in fights among ourselves—Manning choked one and a sailor smashed another's head with a stone. I myself have fought, striking and shouting like the rest, but somehow have retained enough reason to set down here what is happening to us. We are all going rapidly crazy—that is the only explanation. The cause of this remains a horrible mystery, but one whose solution I think I can guess at. The air! The chemical-poisoned atmosphere of this asteroid! The elements that impregnate it, which we could not identify, must be elements unknown to human science that break down the human mind. Perhaps they even affect the body, for somehow we all seem to have grown more hulking and brute-like. One of the men says that he saw the ape-things we saw yesterday, but that now they are running on all four limbs instead of walking upright. Also the reptilian creatures that were running in the forests when we arrived have taken to the water and are living in the lake or pool. This seems to be a world of madness!

"*July 17.* Only able to think and remember in flashes—can't write long, I fear. Things on this asteroid become more horrible each day. Men are now almost utterly beast-like, snapping and snarling over trifles, throwing themselves into death-combats with each other for the most trivial reasons. Seem gradually losing power of speech, too, uttering instead meaningless cries. Two more were killed this morning, Manning and one of the sailors. They snatched food from some of the others, and the whole crowd darted upon them and tore the two apart like a pack of furious beasts. God help me, I was one of those beasts! The madness that possesses the others is strong in me also, and though I have decreasing

intervals of comparative sanity I am most of the time no better than they. I was right, too, about our bodies being affected as well as our minds. Heavy growths of hair appearing on us, our bodies becoming more squat, shambling and clumsier. Can only with difficulty manipulate the pen to write these words. Everything else living here seems changing too. The reptiles that only days ago were land-creatures have now become green, slimy amphibious things. The amphibians formerly in the lake are nowhere to be seen, but there are some large and curious-looking fish in the waters who have rudimentary limbs. The ape-things we saw when first we landed have now no ape-like resemblance at all but are simply running animals. What does all this mean? My dulling brain can not fathom it but I am sure that it is the asteroid's poisoned atmosphere that somehow works these changes. I fear I shall not be able to write here again.

"*July 18.* Very hard . . . hand can not hold pen right and mind can't remember words . . . put down what I can . . . change going on and we who were men are now but apes, more hairy and brute-like each day . . . the running animals that were apes becoming scaled, verging into the reptile . . . the amphibians that were reptiles becoming fish-like and the fish-things changing into God knows what other and lower horrible forms . . . the secret of this asteroid's horrible mystery! . . . its poisoned atmosphere containing elements that reverse the course of evolution in living things . . . elements unknown to us that are potent to thrust life back down on the road of evolutionary progress it has slowly climbed for ages! God help us, why did we not see it? The ape-things and the reptiles and even the amphibious things of the lake we found here . . . all had once been men! Men of the two other wrecked ships and perhaps also of ships we did not find, men who had been here longer than we! Men, some of whom had been living in this hellish world's poisoned air long enough that they had been thrust back down the evolutionary road of man's past, back down through the ape and the running mammal and the reptile that preceded it, back down into amphibious things such as man's ancestors were far in the dim past! And those who had not been here quite so long had gone down as far as the reptile stage! And others who had come since then were at the ape-stage! And since we came, all have still been steadily slipping downward, the amphibians into fish such as they sprang from ages ago, the reptiles into amphibians, the apes into running mammals and then into reptilian things! And we too have been changing, from man into ape! Our beast-like anger and quarrels, our decreasing capacity to reason, were the first signs of it, and steadily in the following days as our minds have become more irrational and animal-like, our bodies have been taking on more and more of ape-like aspect . . . with last flicker of intelligence none of the others now possess set this down . . . we too going downward through all those forms . . . down through animal and reptile, through amphibian and fish to what . . . to darkness and nothingness, I hope . . . to . . ."

THE scrawled words, which had become more and more illegible, faded into an indecipherable scribbling. Jimmy Dane stared at the white page in the clear starlight from the window. His mind was still working only dully, but he had a sense of infinite horror somewhere in it, and he saw horror reflected on Ann Wentworth's face.

"That explains it," Jimmy struggled to say. "This asteroid's atmosphere—poisonous in some way that reverses the course of evolution——"

"But that last date is only a week or more ago!" cried Ann. "The man who wrote it—the others of this ship, must be somewhere!"

"The ape-things!" Jimmy whispered. "Oh, my God!—the things that haunt this wreck still——"

"Jimmy!" screamed the girl, and Jimmy spun around to see hulking shapes shouldering into the wreck's upper deck from below, dark ape-shapes from which came snarls of fury as they saw the two humans.

There were four of the ape-things, and the foremost of them screamed and sprang at the same moment. With red anger exploding in his brain, Jimmy snarled and leapt to meet the thing. He had forgotten the horror he had just read from the log-book in the rush of his unreasoning rage.

He struck the hairy ape-thing with flailing blows that could not prevent its elongated arms from grasping him. He was crushed to it, smote the hairy beast-face hard as he felt his ribs cracking in its grasp. He heard the chattering cries of the other creatures and the screaming of the girl as from a remote distance.

His knee drove up, and as the ape-thing released him for a moment he struck again with crazy anger.

Through the crimson mists of passion that clouded his mind the cry of Ann Wentworth penetrated.

"Your pistol, Jimmy! Your rocket-pistol!"

The pistol! Jimmy's hand went mechanically to his belt as with a wilder scream the ape-thing charged again.

He fired without consciously willing to do so. The red flame struck the hairy creature charging, and he reeled and fell. Another of the ape-things fell as the pistol's flame shot in their direction.

The other two scrambled to flee down from the upper deck. Jimmy felt his arm jerked aside as he trained the pistol on them.

Ann was sobbing as she held his arm. "Don't—they were men once!" she was crying.

Jimmy emerged from the red haze of anger enough to remember. This beast-like quickness to anger was the first symptom of the slipping back down the evolutionary path that had made men into these ape-things. Houston and Cardell and all the rest of the *Vulcan's* survivors—drawing in with every breath the poisoned air of the asteroid — already quarrelling and snarling——

"We've got to get back to the others!" he told the girl, thickly. "Get them off this asteroid before we too——"

They stumbled down to the lower deck and out of the wreck. The two surviving ape-things were not to be seen.

Ann staggered as they started through the towering growths. "Come on!" yelled Jimmy, and then with a sob in his voice repeated the words as he took the girl's arm.

They stumbled through the dark, weird forest in the direction in which Jimmy sensed dimly that the clearing lay.

It was only by concentrating every thought upon what he must not forget, that they and all the others must leave the asteroid at once, that he could remember why it was they were racing thus through the darkness.

Chattering cries and hoarse calls came from distant places in the night, and knowing as he did what things made them, he felt a sickness in his dazed brain. They lost minutes when Ann halted and insisted angrily that the clearing lay in another direction. Their voices rose to

furious screams as they argued, until Jimmy Dane grasped the girl and pulled her with him by force.

THEY burst into the clearing. The *Vulcan's* survivors apparently all slept, the women in the life-boats and the men on the ground around them. Jimmy Dane found Houston's sleeping form and woke the officer by shaking him violently. Houston snarled viciously and struck his arms aside.

"We've got to get away, in the life-boats!" Jimmy cried. He found odd difficulty in explaining clearly. "The asteroid's atmosphere—poisoning us—making ape-creatures and worse out of men here——"

"Let me alone!" Houston shouted.

Others were waking, calling angrily. Jimmy heard John Wentworth snarl at his daughter as she woke him. "I tell you, we've got to leave!" Jimmy cried desperately. "If we stay here days, even hours, longer we won't be *able* to leave! We'll be animals and not humans!"

"Jimmy, none of them will listen to me!" came Ann Wentworth's despairing call.

The unhuman, animal-like rage surged swiftly in Jimmy and he dragged Houston to his feet. "Order them into the life-boats—now!" he roared.

Houston's eyes blazed crimson and with a blow he knocked the radio-operator back. From his throat came a bull-like bellow.

The other men were on their feet. Jimmy sought to control the red tide of anger rising in him. If he gave way to it now they were all lost.

He sprang forward with fists clenched. If he could knock out Houston he might get the rest to obey his orders. If he could get them into the boats—away from this hell-world——

His fists thudded into Houston's body but in his insensate fury the officer seemed not to feel the blows. His clutching hands sought the radio-operator's throat.

They struggled, staggered about locked in combat. Jimmy heard the men about them yelling, heard the sound of other blows as some of the others started fighting.

The clearing had become a place of madness, men fighting with the unreasoning fury of beasts, women who had emerged from the boats cheering them shrilly as they fought. Jimmy still heard Ann Wentworth's despairing call over their cries.

He tore Houston's hands from his throat, spun and got his own forearm around the officer's neck from behind. The madness of a battling animal possessed him further as he tightened his grip on the choking man. Far back in his red-lit brain a part of him told him that this was the end of everything, that in surrendering thus to his rage he was becoming still more the animal, going with the others down that dreadful path from man to beast.

But there was no chance of escape now. These madly fighting humans around him could never now be induced to enter the boats and leave. All chance of escape was gone and there was nothing left but to fight on, to kill the man in his grasp—to kill——

"Jimmy!" The utter and frantic despair in that call made him slacken his hold a little. It was Ann Wentworth, clinging to him as he held the choking Houston. "Jimmy, look! A ship!"

Dully, still holding Houston in his grasp, Jimmy looked up to where the girl pointed. A huge dark bulk sinking out of the night above them—the gleam of lights and the thunder of rocket-tubes blasting——

Then the space-ship had landed beside the clearing, crushing the edge of the towering growths beneath it. Doors in it were opening and uniformed men were emerging, men who stood aghast at the spectacle of the crazily battling humans in the clearing.

JIMMY dropped the half-unconscious Houston and staggered with Ann toward these men.

"What in God's name has happened?" a wide-eyed officer demanded of him. "Are these the survivors of the *Vulcan?*

"We got the *Vulcan's* interrupted radio-call, and as our ship was nearest we stood toward it," he was saying. "Saw this uncharted asteroid and supposed survivors would have made for it. But have they all gone crazy?"

"Listen," said Jimmy Dane hoarsely. "Don't talk—drag them into your ship, now. If they stay here much longer they'll be done for and so will you—poisoned atmosphere——"

He was only dimly aware of the following minutes. He felt himself and Ann Wentworth being half carried into the ship, heard excited voices and running feet as its crew struggled in the clearing to bring others inside. He heard the slam of space-doors and the blast of tubes as the ship rose.

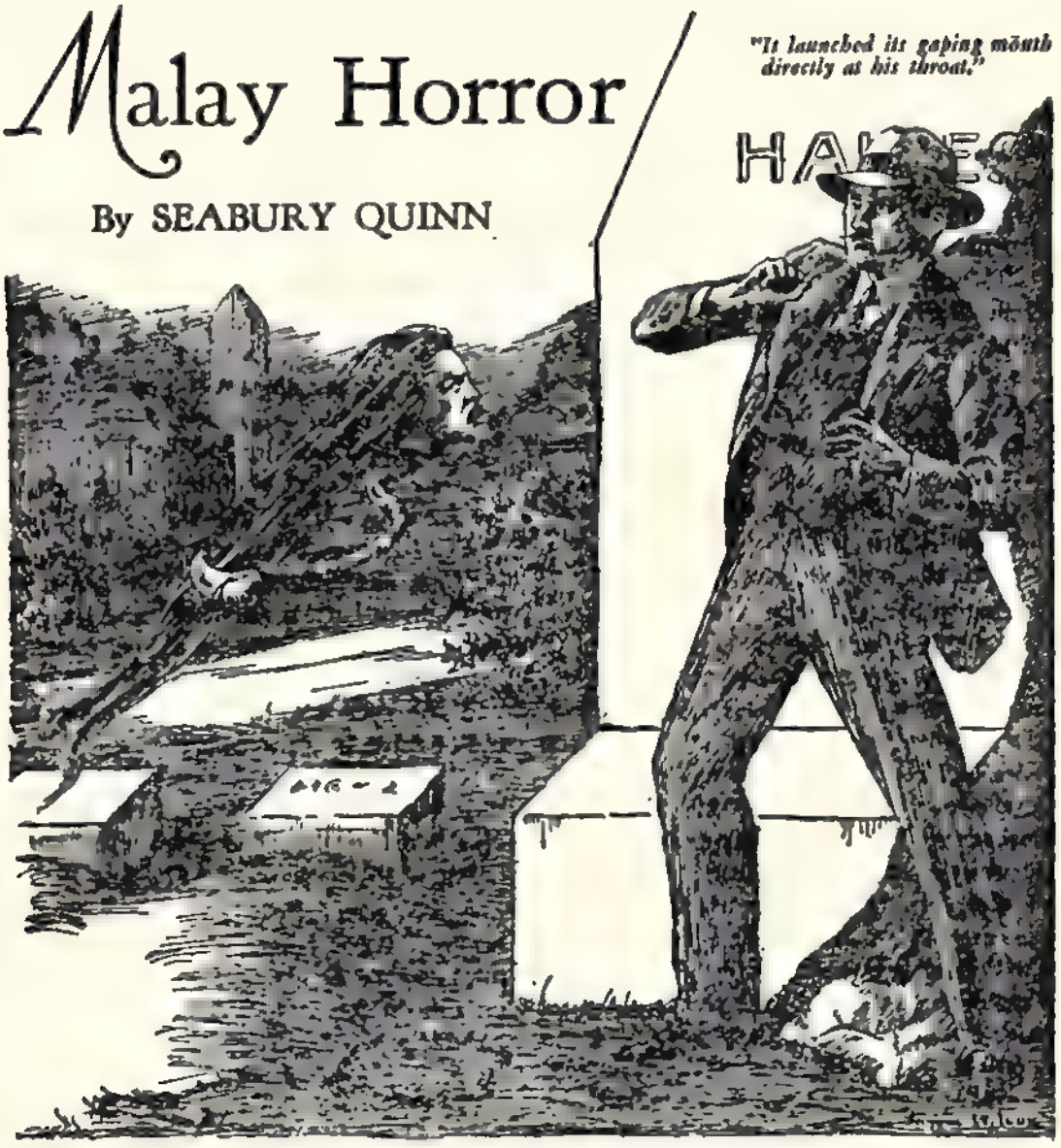
His only clear sensation was that his breathing no longer rasped his lungs, that the pungent smell of chemicals was gone from the air he inhaled. Then slowly his mind cleared and he realized he was in the upper deck of the ship, and that near by were Ann Wentworth and her father, and Houston and Cardell and all the others.

They had ceased struggling now, were looking dazedly at one another as though only now conscious of their identities. Their minds were clearing, Jimmy knew, even as his was, as they breathed clean air again. They would continue to clear, now that they were out of the asteroid's deadly atmosphere, until once again they approached the normal. Would even they who had spent but hours in that atmosphere be ever entirely the same as before? He felt they would, prayed they would.

He found Ann Wentworth beside him, clinging to him and gazing back at the asteroid. It was a diminishing green ball in the star-scattered void now. Dane, gazing somberly back at it, knew that she was thinking even as he was of those upon it who were far beyond all hope, those who would go down and down and back and back along the awful record of man's past until they reached the end. Might that end come soon! And might no other men set foot upon the asteroid until time itself had ended.

Malay Horror

By SEABURY QUINN



"It launched its gaping mouth directly at his throat."

A tale of stark terror, and the grisly thing that pursued a beautiful girl to America—a story of Jules de Grandin

THE storm which had been threatening since noon broke with tropic fury just as darkness dropped upon the northern Jersey hills. Hackensack, where we might have found asylum, was half an hour's steady drive behind us, Harrisonville almost as far ahead, and, as far as I could remember, nothing offering more effective shelter than a roadside tree stood anywhere between, not even a hot-dog stand, a filling-station or a vegetable market.

"Looks as though we're in for it," I muttered grimly, drawing the storm curtains as tightly as I could and setting the automatic windshield-wiper clicking. "If we hadn't stopped for that last drink at the clubhouse——"

"We should have had a ducking, just the same, and should have missed the drink, *parbleu,*" Jules de Grandin cut in with a laugh. "A little water is no tragedy, if applied to one's outside, my friend, and——"

The deafening detonation of a clap of thunder and the blinding flash of lightning searing through the dripping heavens interrupted him, and like an echo of the thunderbolt's concussion came the crashing of a tree across the road ahead. Another zigzag of forked lightning ripped the clouds apart and struck its target squarely, hurling a shattered oak athwart the highway just behind us.

Our position was untenable. The thunder had increased to drumfire quickness, and everywhere about us trees were crashing down. Our only safety lay in abandoning the car and taking to the open fields. Turning up our jacket collars, we scrambled from the shelter of the motor-car and dodged among the groaning, storm-racked trees.

The trip through the woods was like running the gauntlet of a barrage, for the lightning was almost incessant and the howling storm-wind bent the tree trunks and ripped off branches, which came hurtling down with smashing impact. More by luck than conscious effort, we struggled through the copse of oak and maple and padded ankle-deep in sodden grass across the open field.

"Yonder—shines—a—light!" de Grandin bellowed in my ear between cupped hands, then pointed to a shifting, fitful gleam which shone through the blinding storm three hundred yards or so away.

I sank my chin a little deeper in the collar of my sopping jacket and, bending my head against the driving storm, began to trot toward the promised shelter.

"Odd," I reflected as we struggled through the drenching rain, "there shouldn't be a light up there. The only house within a mile is the old Haines mansion, and that hasn't been occupied since——"

Shaking the water from my eyes I brought my cogitations to a stop. Only a fool would pause for thoughts like these when shelter from the storm was offered.

"Holà, à la maison!" de Grandin shouted, hammering on the rain-polished panels of the mansion's heavy door. "Make open the door all quickly, *pour l'amour de Dieu!* We drown, we perish; we are very uncomfortable!"

His hail was twice repeated before we heard a shuffling step and the big door was moved back a scant six inches to permit an old and very wrinkled yellow man to inspect us critically with small, unwinking eyes which somehow reminded me of those of a monkey.

"I am Doctor——" began the Frenchman, and at the title the door swung fully open and the porter motioned us to enter.

"You docta feller?" he asked as we dodged gratefully into the proffered shelter. "You get here pretty quick. Me tefelone you ten-twenty minute, you say no can do for long time while God feller make big lain, then you come *chop-chop*, all same. Me think you dam' good feller for come like that through storm. Missy Lady all same pletty sick. You not chase devil feller out, me think maybe so she die pletty quick. You come now. She wait up stair." Peremptorily he motioned us to follow him.

My surmise had been right. It was the old Haines mansion where we were, though who our strange host and the mysterious "Missy Lady" who waited upstairs for us might be, and what they did in a house of evil memories which had been closed for twenty years, was more than I could guess.

Whoever they were, they had gone far

toward making the old ruin habitable. Broken windows had been reglazed, the rosewood wainscoting had been oiled and polished and the oaken floors freshly waxed and strewn with an abundance of warm-colored Indian rugs. Electric light had been in the experimental stage when the foundations of the old house were dug, but some one had evidently rehabilitated the carbide gas plant in the cellar, and flames burned brightly in the ruby-glass globes of the ceiling chandelier with a scarcely audible hiss. Cedar logs blazed comfortably on the newly polished brass fire-dogs beneath the high mantel; curtains of bright silk and lambrequins of split bamboo, such as had been fashionable in the middle eighties, hung at the arched doorways leading from the hall.

We paused a moment by the cheerful fire, but: "You come," our guide admonished in a high, cracked voice, glancing back across his shoulder. "Bime-by dly clothes. Now you come chase devil-devil out Missy Lady's neck. You savvy?" He shuffled almost soundlessly toward the wide stairway above which our unexpected patient waited.

SURPRIZING as the rejuvenated mansion was, our guide was more so. Scarcely five feet tall, he was as thin as almost fleshless bones could make him, and his butter-colored skin was stretched drum-tight upon his skeleton everywhere except his face. There it was cut and etched and crisscrossed with innumerable deep-cleft wrinkles till his countenance resembled the rind of a frost-bitten pumpkin. A little green-silk cap was perched rakishly upon his hairless head; a tightly buttoned jacket of freshly washed and starched white drill encased his torso; in lieu of trousers his nether limbs were cased in a length of brightly batiked cotton wound so tightly in a skirt-like drapery that it forced him to proceed with a hobbled, shuffling gait. Heelless shoes of woven straw, like the slippers Chinese laundrymen wear at their work, were on his feet, and their straw soles grated softly with a *whish-whish* at each sliding step he took across the polished floor.

The unmistakably sickly-sweet scent of burning joss-sticks assailed our nostrils as we followed up the stairs and down the upper corridor to a darkened bedroom where our conductor paused and called softly: "Missy Lady, docta fella come all quick for dlive off devil-devil. You see 'um now?"

An odd-sounding, half-articulate gurgle, like the cry of some one being slowly strangled, answered him, and he motioned us to enter. No light burned in the room, but here and there the gloom was dotted by the ruddy glow of smoldering punk sticks, and the air reeked with the cloying sweetness of the incense.

"*Morbleu*, it is intolerable!" de Grandin cried. "Lights, my ancient one, and quickly; then fling away these so abominable inventions of the devil. No wonder she is ill! This stink, it is enough to make a camel weep for envy!"

A match scratched, and a moment later a gas flame flared behind the etched glass shade of a wall fixture. By its light we saw a woman lying in a great sleigh bed, pillows heaped behind her till she seemed to sit more than to recline. A silken coverlet was drawn close about her chin. A bunch of bright red flowers, oddly reminiscent of a funeral wreath, lay on the comforter. There was something coppery, almost metallic, about her. Her hair, thick and very glossy, was the color of new-minted copper, and simply parted in the middle, drawn above her ears and knotted low upon her neck. Her eyes were almost bronze in shade, and shone

as if with unshed tears. Her features were small and straight and regular, chin pointed, lips rather thin, but exquisitely curved, her skin an even golden tan which told of long exposure to the sun.

"Eh bien, Mademoiselle, it seems we are arrived in time to save you from asphyxiation," de Grandin announced. "Your—the excellent old one who admitted us — informed us that you were indisposed. What seems to be——"

He paused beside the bed, and his thin, sensitive mouth drew sharply down at the corners. *"La diphthérie?"* his lips formed the words silently as he looked at me for confirmation of the diagnosis.

I looked sharply at the patient. Her face was slightly cyanotic, her lips were slightly parted and her breathing stertorous. Constantly her throat was working, as though she sought to swallow some obstruction, and, there was no doubt about it, her eyes were definitely protuberant, as from a pressure on the trachea, perhaps a consequence of Graves' disease. No swelling of lymphatics at the angle of the jaw appeared, however, and I withheld my opinion till I had an opportunity of examining the fauces and tonsils.

"Will you open your mouth?" I asked, leaning over her; then:

"I say, de Grandin, look at this!" I cried, incredulity in my voice as I pointed to the patient's throat. Around her neck, midway between the jaw and shoulders, was a plainly marked depression, smooth and circular, as from an invisible ligature which seemed to be drawing steadily tighter with garroting force, for even as we looked we saw the indentation grow white and whiter, saw the shrinking flesh sink further as the unseen tourniquet was tightened.

"Mon Dieu," exclaimed the Frenchman, "she is strangling!" and even as he spoke the girl sat up in bed, clawing at her throat with frenzied hands while her mouth gaped open horribly and her tongue protruded. A choking, gasping sob escaped her tortured lips; then she fell back limply on the pillows, eyes closed, chest heaving, little whimpering noises sounding in her throat.

But the spasm seemed definitely over. Her breath came naturally, though with considerable labor, and the white ring on her throat began to fade.

"Attendez-vous," de Grandin hailed the little yellow man. "Ammonia, aromatic spirits of ammonia—*non,* ten thousand small blue devils, you can not understand!—where in Satan's name is the bathroom?"

"Bathloom?" the other echoed uncomprehendingly.

"Précisément; la salle de bain — the place where medicines are kept!"

"Oh, me savvy," said the other in a flat and uninflected voice. "You come; I show you."

They hurried down the hall and presently de Grandin returned with a glass of ammonia and water, which he administered to the patient. "I would we had some belladonna hand, he murmured as the girl drained the draft and settled back upon her pillows. "It would be of assistance. There is nothing but cosmetics to be had back there, and paint and powder are no use in such a case. If——"

"What do you make of it?" I interrupted, thinking wonderingly of the cincture we had seen form round the girl's slim throat, apparently for no earthly reason.

"Parbleu, I do not know," he told me earnestly. "If it were not for certain things I should have said it was the work of——"

A wild, high wail from the little yellow man cut short his words. *"Abee,*

abee — penanggalan, penanggalan!" he shrieked, falling to his knees and bowing forward like a closed-up jack-knife. *"Abee, awah!"*

"Que diable?" snapped de Grandin; then:

"Obé, mon Dieu, one sees! Behold, my friend, he speaks the truth!" Seizing my shoulder he whirled me round to face the window, and pointed to the rain-glazed pane.

There, limned against the background of the tempest's blackness, hung a face.

I say "hung" advisedly, for it showed against the window in the very center of the pane, and from above and underneath there was nothing to support it. It was a handsome woman's face, beautiful with a sort of eery beauty, but deadly in its look of hatred and malignancy. The skin was an incredibly lovely shade of golden brown, smooth and faintly iridescent, the hair which framed it was a dull cloud of ebon splendor. The features were clear-cut, classic, but exotic; high, wide brow, straight, thin nose with faintly flaring nostrils, sharp, pointed chin and thin, black-penciled brows curving like circumflexes above a pair of wide, green eyes with pupils flecked with red, burning like live cinders, unwinking, mesmeric. The mouth was large, with thin, cruel, scarlet lips and white and gleaming teeth which showed their vicious sharpness as the lips curled back in a soundless snarl of leopardine fury.

Beneath the head there was no body, but a length of esophagus hung pendantly below the severed neck, and from this in turn hung a stomach sac. It was incredible, impossible, bizarre; but there it was: a living, grimacing face with unsheathed stomach and esophagus was *floating in the air* outside the bedroom window.

"GOOD heavens," I exclaimed, "what *is* it?"

"The *penanggalan,* did not you hear him say so?" de Grandin answered, and, it seemed to me, he had grown calmer since the dreadful apparition showed outside the window. Whirling toward the bed he snatched up the wreath of scarlet flowers. As he did so I noticed for the first time that their stems were set with long, curved thorns.

"Allez, Madame," he commanded, stepping toward the window. *"Allez-vous-en!* I have here that which will render you decidedly uncomfortable if——" he threw the window open and swept the thorn-set flowers in a wide half-circle. As he did so the half-dissected horror gave ground, hovered menacingly in the swirling rain a moment, then disappeared from view with a shrieking, cachinnating laugh which was half sardonic merriment, half despairing scream.

"So," he murmured as he closed the window and replaced the flowers on the bed. "At last one understands—in part, at least. One might have damn suspected something of the kind, yet it is strange, infernally strange that such an one should be here in New Jersey. If this were Borneo or Flores or the Peninsula, one might look for her; but here? *Non,* we must seek further information."

"Docta *Tuan* blave man!" the little yellow individual complimented with a low, ingratiating bow. "Him not 'flaid Missy Penanggalan; him dlive her off pletty dam' quick!"

De Grandin looked at him with interest. "How long has she been flying round the house, my friend?" he asked.

"Long time, three-four week," the other answered. "Missy Joan bling one piecee coffin here from Manula; bury 'um in glaveyard. Pletty soon Miss Penanggalan come fly all lound house.

"Missy Lady ketchum plenty sickness; get devil-devil in neck. All same maybe turn into *penanggalan* pletty soon if Doctor *Tuan* not come *chop-chop* for dlive devil-devil off.

"Ah Kee ketchum plenty thorn-flower for lay on bed. Maybe Missy Penanggalan not love that thorn-feller velly much. Ah Kee burn joss-stick all lound loom, too. No dam' good. Missy Penanggalan come all time, fly lound house, make bad face outside window. Ah Kee can do no more; he tefelone Docta *Tuan* for come all soon. You dlive devil-devil out Missy Lady's neck, maybe so?"

There was a look of child-like faith and pleading in his wrinkled visage as he spoke. Jules de Grandin beamed on him. "*Pardieu,* that we shall, *mon vieux,* or may I dine upon stewed turnips!" he replied. "And as we speak of dining I remind myself that I have not yet supped. Have you anything to eat about the place? We shall be here all night, it seems, and I would not care to fast till morning."

"All light, me ketchum food," the little man responded. "You stay for look at Missy Lady?"

"We shall most indubitably stay," returned de Grandin. "Bring the food to us when it has been prepared, and do not stint the quantity; this is a very devil of a devil-devil we must fight, and we fight poorly on an empty stomach, my little old one."

As the diminutive yellow man shuffled off, de Grandin turned to me, brows arched, lips pursed quizzically. "This is of interest, my friend," he assured me. "This creature, this *penanggalan* we saw tonight, she is a rare specimen; I have heard of her, but——"

"Ah Kee, Ah Kee, are you there?" a weak voice called. "Did it come again, Ah Kee? I'm afraid; terribly afraid it will come back and——"

"Compose yourself, *Mademoiselle,*" de Grandin answered. "Ah Kee is gone, but we are here. I am Doctor Jules de Grandin, this is my good friend and colleague, Doctor Samuel Trowbridge. We were driving past your charming house when the storm broke and we knocked upon your door for shelter. It appeared your excellent intendant had summoned medical assistance, but the one he called had been unable to respond. Accordingly he requested that we help you, and we arrived in time to drive away a most unpleasant visitor. Now——"

"It came, then?" the woman interrupted.

"It came, *Mademoiselle,*" agreed de Grandin, "but it also went. *'Allez,'* I told it, and *pouf!* like that it went. Me, I am very clever, *Mademoiselle.*"

Despite her fear, the girl smiled wanly as he finished speaking. Women, animals and children took instinctively to Jules de Grandin, and our latest patient was no exception to the rule.

"How did you drive it off?" she asked.

"How? By telling it it was not welcome—and by threatening to lacerate its appendages with the thorns of these flowers," he answered with a grin. Then, sobering suddenly:

"*Mademoiselle,* I have said I am a doctor. That is true; I hold degrees from Vienna and the Sorbonne; but I am more than a physician. I am a practised occultist, and have spent as much time grappling with the foes of the spirit as with those of the flesh. Also I have traveled much, and have spent some time in the Malay Archipelago and Peninsula. When we heard your servant cry out in terror that the *penanggalan* was come, I realized the import of his words, and though I have never come to grips with a demon of this order, I welcome the

challenge which it brings. Will you permit that I assist you, *Mademoiselle?*"

"Oh, yes!" the girl responded. "I've been so terrified; if you will help me——"

"Très bon, it is a bargain, *Mademoiselle,"* the Frenchman interrupted, possessing himself of one of the slim hands lying on the counterpane and lifting it to his lips. "Now—as you Americans so drolly say—to business. Begin at the commencement, if you please, and tell us everything leading to the advent of these most unwelcome visits. Your servant told us something of your bringing back a coffin to America and having it interred. How was it that you came to do so?"

"It was the body of my father," the girl replied. "I brought it back from Manura for burial in the family plot in Shadow Lawns, and——"

She paused a moment, and a shudder rippled through her frame; then, taking a firm hold upon her quaking nerves, she began anew:

"MY NAME is Joan Haines. I am twenty years old. I was born in this house, and my mother died when I was born. My father, Henry Haines, had spent several years on the island of Manura, and made a considerable fortune and restored the family home before his marriage. When Mother died he was almost beside himself with grief, declared he never wanted to see this place again, and left almost immediately for the Islands. I was taken by my father's cousin, Thomas Haines, who lived in Harrisonville, and reared as a member of his family. I lived with him until a year ago, and his son Philip and I fell desperately in love.

"During all the years when I was growing up my father never wrote me. He sent regular remittances to my uncle —Cousin Tom was so much my senior that I always called him uncle—for my support and education, but though I wrote him frequent little-girl letters, trying desperately to make him love me, he never answered. Uncle Tom kept in correspondence with him, though, and every time I had a picture taken a print of it was sent my father; so he knew what I looked like, though I had no idea of his appearance.

"My cousin Philip and I had been inseparable as children, went to grammar and high school together, and matriculated at the same college and graduated together. Just after graduation I wrote Father that Phil and I wanted to be married, and then I got the first and only letter which I ever had from him.

"It was stilted and unfriendly, the kind of letter which a stranger might have written, and refused permission for our marriage. He accused Phil and Uncle Tom of wanting my money, and ordered me to come out to Manura at once, as, he said, he had other plans for me.

"I hardly knew which way to turn. Phil and Uncle Tom urged me to ignore Father's orders, but, somehow, I couldn't bring myself to do so. I don't know why it was; perhaps the fact that I'd grown up as a sort of orphan made a difference; possibly the strange, aloof attitude my father had always assumed regarding me piqued my curiosity as much as it excited my vague longings for a real father's affection. At any rate, I decided to go out to him and tell him everything about Phil and me. I was sure that I could win him over. So it was arranged.

"Manura is a little island—just a flyspeck on the map — which lies on the Celebes side of Flores. It took me nearly a month to get out there, and when I finally got there it was too late."

"Too late?" de Grandin echoed.

"Too late, yes," she answered. "My father was dead.

"Manura is nominally under Dutch rule, but it's so unimportant that they haven't a regularly resident administrator there, and the actual government is carried on by the native sultan, Ali Nogoro. When I arrived I discovered that my father had been married for some years to one of the sultan's sisters, a fine-looking native woman named Salanga, who had been given him as wife in return for his promise that he would give *me* to the sultan when I arrived at marriageable age."

"Mon Dieu!" exclaimed de Grandin.

"Exactly," she assented with a bitter little smile. "That was the bargain they had made. As Ali Nogoro's brother-in-law, my father had everything his own way in Manura. Other traders were permitted on the island only by his sufferance, and as a consequence of this preferment he had become enormously wealthy. But I was the price he had agreed to pay.

"At the last, though, he must have repented his revolting bargain, for I found a will, duly authenticated by the Dutch district commissioner, which left everything to me, and a note requesting me to bring his body back to Harrisonville for burial beside my mother. 'Go home, child,' the note told me; 'open the old house where I was so happy for a little while, and be happy there with the man you love.'

"Fortunately for me, Father had sent much of his fortune home for deposit in American banks, for when I refused to carry out the bargain and marry Sultan Ali Nogoro, he confiscated everything, and had it not been for Ah Kee, my father's half-caste number one man, I probably shouldn't have been able to escape Nogoro after all. You see, I had practically no money when I landed, and Nogoro absolutely refused to let me take so much as a stick of furniture from my father's house or godown.

"But Ah Kee had some money of his own, and with it he paid the coolies for disinterring my father's coffin, bribed some fishermen to take us to Flores in their boat, then paid our passage to America.

"Bad as Nogoro was to deal with, his sister Salanga, who was, after all, my father's widow, proved far worse. She declared she had 'lost face' by my refusal to carry out the marriage bargain which had been made for me, and the will which virtually disinherited her infuriated her even more. I offered to share everything which Father left with her, half and half, and even had a Dutch notary draw up a quitclaim of half the inheritance, but she tore the paper into shreds, spit at me, and would have done me physical injury if they had not restrained her. The day before I left Manura she committed suicide."

"Suicide?" de Grandin asked. "You mean a sort of vengeance death, like the *hara-kari* of the Japanese?"

"I—I suppose so, sir. Her body was found in the bed she'd occupied in my father's house the day before Ah Kee and I left Manura. But——"

"Tiens, now I think that we approach the egg's good meat!" de Grandin cut in softly as she paused in her recital. "Yes, *Mademoiselle?* But——"

"But when the coolies went to the cemetery to disinter my father's coffin they found Salanga's decapitated body sprawled prostrate on the grave. The arms were opened, as though to embrace the mound, and the feet were spread apart, as though to hold down whatever lay beneath. Her neck had been severed close to the shoulders, and the head was nowhere to be found."

De Grandin twisted fiercely at the

needle points of his trimly waxed wheat-blond mustache. "Tell me, *Mademoiselle,*" he asked irrelevantly, "who officiated at your father's interment in the grave beside your mother?"

"Why, Doctor Bentley, the rector of St. Chrysostom's; he had been——"

"*Non,* you do misapprehend. I do not mean the clergyman, but the mortician."

"Oh, the undertaker. Why, Mr. Martin, of Harrisonville, who made all the necessary arrangements."

"U'm? Thank you. What then, if you please?"

"Ah Kee and I came out here, and as soon as Mr. Van Riper, our family lawyer, completes the probate of my father's will, I intend having the place completely modernized. My cousin Philip and I are to be married in the fall, if I——"

Once more she paused, and de Grandin leant forward with quick understanding as he patted her hand reassuringly. "Do not be alarmed, *ma chère;* you will assuredly live that long, and much longer, too," he comforted. "I, Jules de Grandin, guarantee it.

"Now," once more his cool, professional manner asserted itself, "when was it that you first observed these untoward occurrences, if you please?"

"I'VE been home one month tomorrow," she replied. "We'd just come out here, three weeks ago, when one night I wakened from a sound sleep hearing some one laughing at me.

"At first I thought I'd dreamed it, but the laughter persisted, even when I sat up in bed. I looked around; there was no one in the room. Then I rose to light the gas, and as I did so, chanced to look toward the window. *There was Salanga's head.* It hung in midair, with nothing to sustain it, just outside the window, and laughed at me.

"Suddenly I felt a stifling, choking sensation, as though a band were drawn about my throat. I put my hands up to my neck, but there was nothing there. But the throttling feeling grew, and as my fingers touched my throat I could feel the flesh sinking in, as though compressed by an invisible cord. My breath came shorter and shorter, I could hear the heart-beats pounding in my ears, and everything turned black; then bright lights flashed before my eyes. I tried to call Ah Kee, but only a sort of awful gurgle, like water rushing down a drain, sounded when I tried to scream. Somehow I managed to reach the bed and fell there, choking and gasping. Then I lost consciousness.

"When I came to, my throat was sore and bruised, and that awful, bodiless head still hung there just outside the window, mouthing and grimacing at me. Presently it gave a fiendish, screaming laugh and floated away, leaving me half dead with pain and fright.

"As soon as I was strong enough I called Ah Kee, and told him what had happened. He seemed terribly frightened and began mumbling prayers or incantations in Malayan and Chinese. Then he asked me to bolt the door and window, and ran out as though pursued by fiends. In a little while he came back with an armful of Japanese quince, which he twisted into two big wreaths, one of which he insisted on putting on the bed. The other he hung in the window, like a Christmas decoration.

"For the next two nights I rested easily, but the third night I woke up with a feeling of oppression, as though a great weight rested on my chest. I tried to sit up, and instantly the invisible cord tightened round my throat and I began to choke. As I turned my head in agony I

saw Salanga's head staring at me through the window.

"Every night it's been like that. I try to stay awake, drinking strong black coffee and tea so strong and bitter that it fairly rasps my throat, but sooner or later I drop off; indeed, it seems as though there is some curse of sleep upon me, for every evening, just at dusk, I find myself so drowsy that no matter how I fight it, I fall asleep, and sleep is the signal for that dreadful head to come again and that awful choking to begin.

"Sometimes I'm tormented by this sensation of strangulation as often as a dozen times a night; other times I suffer only once, then manage to hold myself awake by main strength of determination, but——"

"Can't you sleep in the day?" I interrupted. "The head doesn't appear in daylight, does it?"

"No, it doesn't; but no matter how exhausted I may be, I can't sleep in the light," the girl replied. "I've tried again and again, but just as I can't seem to keep from dozing as soon as it turns dark, I find myself unable to snatch even five minutes' rest by day. It's maddening, and when I say that I'm not speaking figuratively. I really feel that unless I find some way to escape this torment I'll go crazy."

Thoughtfully de Grandin extracted a cigarette from his case of engine-turned silver, set it alight and blew twin columns of gray smoke from his narrow, sensitive nostrils. At length:

"Mademoiselle," he announced, "I think I see an avenue of escape. Will you submit to hypnotism?"

"Hypnotism?"

"Précisément. Sleep, as you know, can be hypnotically induced; but that is only half the plan. The skilled hypnotist can, by very strength of will, command the blood to flow from the subject's hand or leg, leaving the member totally anemic. It is possible that by exercising a similar command I can induce you to sleep naturally and to ignore the orders of this cursed apparition, thus saving you from torment. Are you willing to experiment?"

"Yes, of course," she answered.

"Bien. You will compose yourself, if you please, and gaze fixedly at this——" He drew a silver pencil from his pocket and waved it slowly, like a pendulum, before her eyes. "Sleep, *Mademoiselle;* sleep, sleep. Sleep soundly and naturally. Obey me only, heed no other's orders; experience no feeling of compression round your neck. Sleep, sleep; sleep——"

A shriek of wild, unearthly laughter sounded from the storm-swept night outside, and to our horror we descried the telltale band of white begin to form about Joan Haines' throat. The indentation deepened, the crimson of her lips took on a violet tinge and between her parted teeth her tongue protruded. Her eyes bulged forward in their sockets and on each cheek appeared small spots of ecchymoses.

With one accord we turned and faced the window. There, like a miniature balloon, hung the severed head of the *penanggalan,* its red lips parted in a mocking smile of hate, green, red-flecked eyes dancing with devilish merriment, sharp, white teeth flashing in the gaslight's rays.

"By damn, I am annoyed, I am angry and enraged!" de Grandin stormed, snatching up the wreath of scarlet flowers from the bed and rushing toward the window. "Be careful how you play your tricks on Jules de Grandin, *Madame;* he is a very dangerous customer!"

Flinging up the sash he lunged out

viciously with the thorn-spurred blossoms, and so quick and cat-like was his gesture that the laughing visitant was a thought too slow in darting backward.

A shrill, ear-splitting shriek resounded through the night as a sharp thorn came in contact with the floating horror's stomach sac, and a bloody weal appeared upon the serous coating of the greater curvature. Like a wind-extinguished light the dreadful head was gone, leaving but the echo of its anguished wail to tell us it had been there.

"*Ah-ha; ah-ha-ha,* I think that she will pause for self-debate before she interrupts our work again," announced de Grandin as he closed the window with a bang. "Now, *Mademoiselle,* if you please. . . ."

Once more he drew the pencil from his waistcoat pocket and began the process of hypnosis. In a few minutes Joan Haines' eyes closed sleepily; then her lips parted as she drew a deep and tranquil breath. Less than five minutes from his opening command she was sleeping naturally, like a tired child, and though we watched beside her till the eastern sky was streaked with gray, there was no sign of strangling marks upon her throat, nor any indication of a further visitation from the dreadful severed head.

THE storm passed with the night, and, fortified with several cups of strong coffee brewed by Ah Kee, we left Joan Haines sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion and set out for town. Highway patrols had cleared away the wreckage from the road, and we made excellent progress through the clear, rain-washed summer morning.

"Tell me," I demanded as we drove along, "what the deuce is a *penanggalan,* de Grandin?"

He twisted thoughtfully at the ends of his mustache a moment; then:

"She is a sort of nocturnal demon closely analogous to the vampire of eastern Europe," he replied, "but she differs from him in a number of respects. First of all, she is, or was, always a woman, whereas the vampire may be either male or female. Again, while the vampire appears with all his members complete, the *penanggalan* possesses only a head, esophagus and stomach sac, either leaving the remainder of her body at her dwelling-place, or—as often happens—permitting it to rot within the grave while only head and stomach retain their evil immortality.

"How one becomes a *penanggalan* is a matter of debate. Some say she was a woman of evil life who uses the magic arts of the devil who is her master to enable her to detach her head and assume volant powers; others declare she is one who died by self-destruction; still others maintain that she is a sorceress who by her magic contrives to remain alive in this fashion after death has overtaken the remainder of her body. However that may be, it is remarkable that the Malay Islands and Peninsula abound with both wizards and witches, and that they are able to perform tricks and work charms which would have turned the witches of Colonial New England and mediæval Europe green with professional envy. Those who have seen the *penanggalan* at her work invariably identify her as some well-known sorceress, either living or dead.

"Her technique differs from the vampire's, too. The vampire, you recall, recruits his grisly ranks by infecting those whose blood he sucks with vampirism, so that they in turn become as he is when he has drained them of their blood and killed them. The *penanggalan,* upon the contrary, can put her seal upon her victim without resorting to physical contact. True, those she drains of blood die, but

when they die they die dead. When she desires to make another woman even as she is, it is but necessary for her to infest the house where her victim dwells and gaze upon her prey. By a sort of vile hypnotic spell she works upon her victim, makes her neck to show the signs of thongs upon it; finally she strangles her to death. And when death comes——"

He paused to light a cigarette, and I could have thumped his head in my impatience.

"Yes, and when death comes?" I prompted.

"*Eh bien,* then life—of a kind—begins," he answered. "The strangled victim's head parts company with her body at the point the magic ligature has marked upon her flesh, and, dragging the esophagus and stomach after it, it flies screaming off to join its hideous fellows in the ranks of the *penanggalans.*

"You will recall how certain fathers of the early church enunciated the cheerful doctrine that the only melancholy pleasure which the damned in hell possessed was to rail at the other damned and shrieking with obscene delight when a new soul came to join them in their torment? In some such way the *penanggalan* seems to derive a certain satisfaction from exercising her spells on poor unfortunates, separating their heads from their bodies and making them even as she is.

"Like the true vampire, the *penanggalan* is a blood-sucker, though unlike him, she does not have to have the sanguinary diet to exist. Apparently she drinks warm blood for pleasure, as the drunkard imbibes liquor, not because she must. Also, as garlic, wild rose and wolf's bane are powerful vegetable antidotes to the vampire, so is the jerju thistle, or any bush with strong, sharp thorns, distasteful to the *penanggalan,* though for a different reason. The vampire dare not approach the garlic or wild rose because they exercise a magic influence on him. The *penanggalan* fears a thornbush because its barbs are liable to become entangled in her dangling stomach sac, or even to pierce it. If the first contingency occurs she can not get away, for she is as highly sensitive to pain as any living person; if, by any chance, her stomach sac is perforated, it can not repair itself by healing, and she dies from the wound. It was for that reason that she fled from me when I menaced her with the thorny flowers last night—*ha,* I very nearly had her once, too, you will recall."

"Does she lie dormant by day, as the vampire does?" I asked.

"Yes. And like the vampire, she usually chooses a tomb, a cemetery or an old and long-deserted house as her lair. She need not necessarily do this, but apparently she does it as a matter of choice. Also, she is unable to exercise her powers of flight across bodies of water affected by the tides, as, by example, bays, estuaries and tide-water rivers. Does not the knowledge of that limitation give you an idea? Does not a possible explanation of the mystery of her presence leap to the eye?"

"Not to mine," I answered. "What's your theory?"

"That depends upon the information Monsieur Martin gives us."

"Martin? The funeral director?"

"But certainly. Who else? Will you drive past his place before we go home?"

"Of course," I agreed, wondering what connection any information John Martin might be able to give could possibly have with the presence of an Oriental demon in the quiet Jersey countryside.

JOHN MARTIN, leading mortician of Harrisonville, was seated in his private office when we stopped at his funeral home. "Good morning, gentlemen," he greeted. "What's the bad news today?"

"Hein?" replied de Grandin.

The big, gray-haired funeral director laughed. "Some one's always in process of getting in or out of trouble when you're around, Doctor de Grandin," he rejoined. "Can I help 'em out—or in?"

"Perhaps," the little Frenchman answered with a smile. "It is of Monsieur Haines that we inquire. You had charge of his interment, I believe?"

"Yes," replied the other. "I remember the case particularly, because his daughter refused to let me furnish a casket."

De Grandin smiled a thought sarcastically, and Mr. Martin put a quick and accurate interpretation on his grin.

"It isn't the loss of the sale that fixes the case in my mind," he hastened to explain, "but the trouble we had with the Oriental coffin which contained Mr. Haines' body. It was one of those Chinese affairs, heavy as a cast bronze sarcophagus, nearly eight feet long by three feet wide and almost four feet high. Grave space in Shadow Lawns is at a premium, and the Haines family plot is pretty well filled, so burying a coffin of that size was no easy task. We had to get special permission from the cemetery board to have a grave larger than their six foot six maximum dug, and we had to pay seventy per cent. above the usual cost of opening a grave for the extra labor. Then, too, our casket coach, which operates with an automatic electric table, wasn't equipped to handle such a large case, and the coffin was too big to fit our lowering-device. I'd almost rather have made the young lady a present of an American casket than go through all the trouble that outlandish foreign coffin caused us."

"U'm? And did you, by any chance, open that outlandish coffin?" de Grandin asked.

"Lord, no! As I've told you, it was a Chinese coffin, apparently hewn out of a single giant log, heavy as cast iron, and almost as hard, judging by the feel of it. The top was high, like a gabled roof, and fastened to the lower section by invisible dowels. I don't know how we'd ever have managed to pry them apart, unless we'd used a buzz-saw, if Miss Haines had decided to let us furnish a new casket."

"And was it airtight and watertight?" de Grandin asked.

"Perfectly. The whole thing had been coated and recoated with red lacquer, smooth and hard as porcelain. Dam' clever people, these Chinese. From the standpoint of utility that coffin was as good as anything our best American factories can turn out."

"Thank you, you have helped us greatly, Monsieur Martin," de Grandin answered. "What you have told is precisely what we wished to know.

"Do you go home and see your silly patients," he directed as we left the Martin mortuary. "Me, I have important duties to perform. I shall return at dinner time or sooner, and I pray that you will be in readiness to accompany me to Mademoiselle Haines' this evening. We must watch with her until we can take steps to obviate the danger which is threatening."

IT WAS nearly six o'clock when he returned, and his temper was far from amiable. The unmentionable rules of that unnamable cemetery vexed him, he informed me. Because, *parbleu!* that seven-times-accursed Monsieur Haines

had taken it into his never-to-be-sufficiently-anathematized head to die in a miserable hole of a place like the Island of Manura with no physician in attendance, there had been no death certificate, and the cemetery people absolutely forbade disinterment of that Monsieur Haines' eternally accursed body.

"D'ye really think there's any danger of Joan's becoming a *penanggalan?*" I asked as we drove out the Andover Road toward the old Haines house. "The idea seems so incredibly bizarre that——"

"There is a very real and present danger of her transformation, my friend," he interrupted soberly. "I think the thing which was her stepmother fears me, and will not try to work her spells while I am present, but that makes our need of haste the more imperative. Come, my old one, tread upon the gas; already it grows dark, and darkness is a time of peril for Mademoiselle Jeanne."

Despite our haste, however, darkness had descended before we reached our destination, and the gaslights were flaring brightly in the hall when Ah Kee answered our summons.

"Missy Jo-an all betta," he informed us when we asked him how the patient did. "All day she sleep an' lest. Ah Kee go up to loom one, two, three time for givum bleakfast, tiffin, dinner, she not wake no time. All time she sleep like little baby. Bimeby she call Ah Kee for ketchum food. I takee one piecee tlay up to loom ten-twenty minute 'fore you come. You like for see her now? Ah Kee think she all finish eat, maybe so."

De Grandin led the way up to the patient's room, talking volubly. "Behold," he boasted, "am I not the clever one? Did not my scheme for hypnotically induced rest work perfectly? But certainly. Shrewd this *sacré* demon from the East may be, but Jules de Grandin is shrewder still. He does not——

"Ah, mon Dieu! Too late! Look, my friends, see the desolation she has wrought while we dallied on the road. *Ohé!"*

I looked across his shoulder, saw Joan Haines sprawled face downward on the bed, hands outspread, clutching the mattress with stiffening fingers as if for anchorage; then, as he moved aside, my breath seemed to form a hot and sulfurous bolus in my throat and my heart beat quick with horror. For it was not Joan Haines who lay upon that bed. It was her headless body.

"Missy Lady, Missy Lady; Missy Jo-an!" screamed Ah Kee despairingly, leaping forward to seize one of the stiff, white hands clutching at the bedding; but:

"Back, my little one!" de Grandin ordered sharply. "Touch her not; we must——"

A hideous screaming chorus of discordant laughter drowned his words, and as we turned to face the window we beheld two severed heads staring at us from the darkness.

The Malay woman's gold-bronze face was aflame with evil triumph, and her red lips writhed with devilish merriment as she sent forth peal on ringing peal of mocking cachinnation. Her red-flecked eyes of agate-green glowed brightly in her face, her white teeth flashed, her every feature was instinct with triumphant, hellish jubilation.

Beside the black-tressed head another floated, a little, heart-shaped face with cheeks of golden tan, crowned with long ringlets of copper-colored hair which swirled and floated in the evening breeze like the loosened locks of a drowned woman floating round her still, dead face. And though she joined the other in the

duet of derisive laughter, there was no quality of merriment in her tones. Rather, it was the despairing, hysterical shriek of one in whom all hope has died. And in her eyes there was the helpless, hopeless pleading of an animal in mortal pain, and down her cheeks there coursed twin trails of shining tear-drops, even as she laughed.

De Grandin suddenly went berserk. "*Dieu de Dieu de Dieu de Dieu!*" he shouted. "Am I to be mocked by this abomination?—made a monkey of by a head without a body?—ten million thousand damn times no!"

Snatching up a heavy vase he struck it on the bedpost, breaking it across the bottom so that it terminated in a jagged, saw-toothed edge, and hurling it with all his frenzied might straight through the window-pane.

The glass crashed outward with a deafening clash and the sharp-toothed missile flew straight to its mark, striking the dangling stomach sac beneath Salanga's head with smashing, devastating impact.

I saw the globular thing sway drunkenly as the broken crockery hit it, heard the anguished scream which cut short the discord of malicious laughter, then shuddered with physical sickness as a spilth of blood-stained liquid spurted from the ruptured sac.

In a second all was quiet—quiet as the tomb. The cord which dangled from the window-blind flapped idly against the sill as a little breath of breeze crept through the broken pane; the gaslight hissed softly in the etched-glass globe; the still, stark body of Joan Haines lay sprawled immovably upon the bed. De Grandin, Ah Kee and I held our breaths in a very œstrum of horror. Suddenly:

"Name of a name, why do we stand here gaping like three *sacré* fools?" the little Frenchman blazed. "Quick, Friend Trowbridge, to your car. Prepare to drive us back to town at once. My little one, I would have your immediate assistance."

He seized Ah Kee by the shoulders and fairly dragged him from the room.

I had hardly had time to seat myself behind the steering-wheel when de Grandin and Ah Kee emerged from the house, each bearing a great armful of the red thorn-flowers and a burlap sack.

"Now, Friend Trowbridge, drive; drive like the devil; drive *comme un perdu* to that ninety-times-condemned Shadow Lawns cemetery. We must get there first!" he panted.

"First?" I queried, setting the motor going. "Before whom?"

"Oh, do not stop to talk or argue," he besought. "Go, drive; fly. We must reach that grave before them!"

I PUSHED my motor to its utmost. When I bought the car the salesman had assured me that it would be valuable in responding to emergencies, and that night I proved that he had spoken truly. Sixty, sixty-five, seventy miles the speedometer registered. As we came in sight of the long green fence enclosing Shadow Lawns the needle indicated seventy-five, and a little plume of grayish steam was streaming backward from my radiator cap.

"*Très bon.* It is enough," de Grandin tapped me on the shoulder. "Come."

We scaled the cemetery fence and, led by him, hastened on among the quiet graves till we reached a level plot where a tall, imposing granite shaft displayed the one word:

HAINES

"Now quiet, on your lives," de Grandin ordered as we sank to cover in the shadow of the monument and he and Ah

Kee fell feverishly to work plaiting long loops of the thorny flower-stalks.

I watched them in bewilderment, but so intent upon their work were they that neither took the slightest notice of my presence. At length:

"Is all prepared?" the Frenchman asked.

"Yup. All flinish; dam' good," Ah Kee returned.

We waited silently for what seemed like an hour, and at last de Grandin seized my shoulder. "Observe, behold; they come!" he told me tensely.

Skimming low above the mounded graves there came what looked like a pair of monstrous birds. They flew heavily, almost blindly, wavering from side to side, swooping near the ground one moment, then suddenly rising to a height of several feet with an awkward, bouncing motion. At last they approached near enough for me to recognize them.

They were two severed human heads, each with a round, balloon-like thing dependent from it. The nearer one flew hesitantly, like a wounded bird, lobbing crazily from side to side, its companion following its flight like a timid, awkward child playing follow-the-leader.

Waveringly they winged their way to a newly mounded grave, hovered in the air a moment, then swooped to earth, wriggling with a terrible, revolting snake-like movement down into the grass.

"Pardonnez-moi, I do not think you will go home tonight, *Mesdames,"* announced de Grandin, stepping from the shadow of the monument. "I have other plans for you."

Deftly, like a skilled *vaquero* casting his lariat, he threw the loop of plaited thorn-bush over the nearer of the burrowing heads and began drawing in the spike-spurred tether as a fisherman might draw in his line.

Inside the thorny bight the trapped thing bobbed about grotesquely, like a savage, wounded beast, gibbering and skirking in a high, thin voice horribly reminiscent of the whimperings of a child in pain, and once or twice, when its struggles brought it into contact with the thorny noose, uttering little gasping mewls.

It was pitiful to see the helpless thing's vain struggles, and I felt the same involuntary sympathy which I should have felt at witnessing a beast held fast in the steel jaws of a trap, but pity changed to horror as de Grandin anchored his noose beneath one foot and opened wide his burlap sack, and the captive head sprang at him like a striking serpent. A sharp thorn tore its dangling stomach, widening the rent already made by de Grandin's saw-toothed missile, but rage had made the thing insensible to pain, and, teeth flashing in the pale moonlight, it launched its gaping mouth directly at his throat.

"Ça-ha, diablesse!" de Grandin cried, throwing up his left hand defensively, and the champing teeth fastened in his sleeve, so that the head hung swaying from his cuff, its long hair flowing nearly to the ground, vicious, growling noises issuing from between the tight-clenched teeth.

With a fierce gesture the Frenchman swung his hand away from his face, reached quickly beneath his jacket and snatched out a hunting-knife.

"E-e-e-ur-r-gh!" a kind of screaming grunt issued from the severed head dependent from his sleeve, and the thing fought desperately to free itself, but the saber-sharp white teeth had pierced clear through the cloth and were entangled in the fabric.

De Grandin swung his knife as a woodsman might his ax. The keen blade sheared through the tough muscular tube of the esophagus pendent from the severed neck, and the dangling stomach sac fell to the graveyard grass.

A wild and anguished cry, half screech, half groan, issued from the head, but the little Frenchman's blade was merciless. Flashing in an arc, it swung again, striking heavily, ax-like, upon the vault of the *penanggalan's* skull, shearing through black, gleaming hair and scalp and bone, burying itself deep in the brain.

The scream of mortal terror died half uttered, like a cry that had been smothered at inception, but the teeth held firmly to his jacket, the jaws fast-locked in cadaveric spasm.

With a wrenching twist he freed his knife-blade from the skull and jammed its gleaming point right in the dead thing's mouth, prying the clenched jaws apart.

Sick at the sight, I turned away.

Ah Kee cast his loop of thorny flowers round the second head, but the savagery which Jules de Grandin had displayed was wholly absent as he gently coaxed the captive toward him. "No be 'flaid, Missy Lady," he crooned softly, twitching delicately at the lasso, lest a sharp thorn wound his catch. "Ah Kee not hurt you; no tly for lun away, you not get hurt!" Slowly, inch by careful inch, he drew the tether in.

"*Très bon,* good work, my little old one!" de Grandin complimented. "Careful—gently—so!" Leaping forward he drew the opened mouth of his sack over the copper-crowned head as it rose a few inches from the grass in a futile struggle to escape the circling loop of thorns.

Gently, as a lad might soothe a frightened kitten, he stroked the bulge in the bag which told where the head lay. "Do not be afraid, *ma pauvre,* we shall not do you injury," he whispered; then, leaving the little half-caste to bear the burden, he paused a moment to stuff the knife-slashed remnants of the other head into the other sack.

"Now, my friend, we must make haste," he told me. "Drive first to your house, then to Mademoiselle Jeanne's, and do not dally on the road, I beg you; a life—*cordieu,* more than a life!—depends upon our speed this night."

I KEPT the motor running while he rushed into the house, reappearing in a little while with two emergency kits and a bulging bundle, then, at his whispered order, shoved the throttle forward and forgot there were such things as legal speed limits as we headed for the old Haines mansion.

"There is no time for proper preparation," he told me when we reached our destination; "we must use the things which are at hand."

To Ah Kee he ordered, "Fetch a shutter, quickly, if you please."

The little man departed, returning in a moment staggering under the burden of a tall window-blind, and the Frenchman threw a sheet across it, then seized one end, signing me to take the other. "It is our litter," he explained as we bore the blind upstairs. "Come, make haste, my friend."

We put Joan Haines' stiffened body on the blind and bore it down to the kitchen, where, beneath the glare of unshaded gaslights, we laid it on the sheet-spread table and de Grandin tore open his parcel, drawing forth two surgical robes.

Donning one, he motioned me to put the other on, and unlatched the satchels, laid out a set of knives, artery-clips, thread and needles, last of all a can of ether.

"A moi," he told Ah Kee, indicating the sack the other held.

"Do not be fearful, *Mademoiselle,"* he soothed as he took the burlap bag between his hands; "this brings forgetfulness and peace—perchance recovery." Gently, caressingly, he stroked the sack, nodding to me to begin dropping ether from the can upon the coarse fabric.

A whimpering cry of fright came from the bag as I dropped the anesthetic on the loosely-woven meshes, but as the strong, sweet smell began to penetrate the room, the flutterings and whimpers lessened, finally subsided altogether.

De Grandin drew the bag's closed lips apart, peeked exploringly into the dark depths, then, with a nod of satisfaction, thrust his hand inside, rummaged about a moment, finally drew forth Joan Haines' head.

"We must be swift," he murmured as he laid the pathetic thing on a small table covered with a clean, fresh cloth. "I do not know how long the anesthesia will last. *Parbleu,"* he drew on rubber gloves and took a knife up delicately between his thumb and forefinger, "I have operated many times, but never before have I seen ether applied to a patient with no lungs to breathe it!"

"Patient?" I echoed wonderingly. Could he be referring to the dead that way?

I watched him curiously as he set to work with that swiftness and dexterity which always characterized his surgery.

Daintily as a watchmaker working at his delicate mechanism, he commenced the median incision, and I gasped with incredulity as I saw the ruby blood follow the knife in a thin, red ribbon.

There was no time to lose. Snatching sponges and arterial clips, I stationed myself at his elbow. Swabbing, clipping, handing him the instruments, I watched in fascination as he made the Y-shaped transverse cut, laid open the thorax and, as calmly as though he were a toymaker constructing a mechanical doll, proceeded to replace Joan Haines' stomach, connect the duodenum and pylorus, close the throat about the esophagus and matter-of-factly sew the wounds together as though the operation which he had performed were one of everyday occurrence.

"D'ye actually believe she's living?" I asked as he completed his last stitch. "Why, it's preposterous—*rigor mortis* has set in, and——"

"Did you observe the blood?" he interrupted, busy with his gloves.

"Why, yes, it did seem strangely liquid," I admitted. "You'd have thought coagulation would have started, but——"

"'But' be everlastingly consigned to hell!" he blazed; "see this!"

Leaning forward, he placed his lips against the dead girl's mouth, and, hands beneath her ribs, bore down upon her diaphragm, at the same time forcing a great lungful of breath down her throat.

Once, twice, three times the process was repeated, and as he raised his head to draw a fourth deep breath, I cried out sharply:

"Look; look, de Grandin—*she's alive!"*

She was. There was no doubt of it. Faintly, so faintly that we could hardly see its motion, her chest was fluttering, like the breast of one who breathes his last, but as he leant above her with redoubled efforts, her respiration strengthened visibly. In a moment she was breathing naturally, drinking in the sultry summer air with deep, thirsty gulps, as a desert-famished woman might have drained cool water from a cup.

We wrapped her inert form in blankets, placed it on our improvised stretcher and bore it to the bedroom where Ah Kee

waited with a dozen bottles of boiling water which we placed around her in the bed.

"I telephoned Mademoiselle Bradfield before we left the city," de Grandin told me. "She is an excellent *garde-malade* for surgical cases, and *le bon Dieu* knows we shall need such an one for Mademoiselle Jeanne."

He had hardly finished speaking when a taxicab wheeled up to the door and Miss Bradfield, stiff, starched and looking extremely sterile and competent in her hospital whites, alighted.

De Grandin prepared a hypodermic syringe and placed it on the bedside table. "Three-quarters of a grain of morphine in the arm the moment she shows signs of consciousness, if you please, *Mademoiselle,*" he told the nurse. "She has been through a serious ordeal, and retching would indubitably prove fatal.

"Now," he signed to me to leave the room, "we have a further duty to perform, my friend; one which shall write *finis* to this chapter of unhappy incidents, I hope."

Downstairs in the cellar Ah Kee had built a roaring fire of oil-soaked wood and shavings in the big, old-fashioned hot-air furnace. Thither de Grandin led me, and paused a moment at the cellar door to take up a blood-soaked burlap sack.

Into the blazing firebox of the furnace he flung the bag, and as the hungry flames enveloped it we saw, for an instant, the beautiful, cruel face of Salanga, the Malay woman, look at us with fixed, staring eyes which, even in the still, set stare of death, were freighted with a gaze of deadly hatred.

"Adieu, Madame Penanggalan; adieu pour l'éternité," de Grandin raised hand to lips in a sardonic gesture of farewell as the lapping tongue of fire closed above the severed head and blotted it from sight.

"And now, *pardieu,* I think that it is time we left," he told me as he turned upon his heel.

"How was it that you knew we'd find them in the cemetery?" I asked as we drove slowly toward the city.

He chuckled as he lit a cigarette before replying:

"You may recall that I asked Mademoiselle Jeanne who officiated at her father's burial?"

"Yes."

"Très bien. And that I told you that my theory of the case depended on the information Monsieur Martin gave us?"

"Of course."

"Very well, then. As I have told you, these *penanggalans* are unable to fly across tide waters; but there is no reason why they can not be carried over. No, certainly.

"Alors, I said to me, 'Jules de Grandin, the body of this Malay stepmother of Mademoiselle Jeanne was found breast-down upon the grave of him who was her husband. Is it not so?'

" 'It are indubitably so,' I answer me.

" 'Very well, then,' I tell me, 'you should know that these Malay demons make their lairs in tombs and graves and old, deserted houses and similar unpleasant places. Are it not possible that she traveled to that grave to shed her head, leaving her body on the earth while the head burrowed downward and found a resting-place inside the coffin with the corpse?'

" 'It are entirely feasible, Jules de Grandin,' I agree. 'And if she hid herself in that coffin she would have no inconvenience coming as a passenger across the ocean. No.'

" 'Ah, but,' I object, 'that Monsieur

Martin, you know him. He is *un homme d'affaires;* surely he would not permit an opportunity for profit to pass by; undoubtlessly he induced Mademoiselle Jeanne to purchase a new casket, and when he transferred Monsieur Haines' body to its new abode he must necessarily have opened that old coffin. Perhaps he saw the *penanggalan?* Perhaps he liberated it from its prison as Pandora let loose the troubles from her box? 'Who knows?'

"'Perhaps,' I answer, 'but all such speculation is the business of the little fish of April. Why not go see Monsieur Martin? He will tell you truly.'

"And so to Monsieur Martin we did go, and he told us that he had not opened that old coffin. *Par conséquent,* it followed that the *penanggalan* was in there yet, or at least it was highly probable that she still used it for home.

"Accordingly, I decided that I would exhume that coffin my own self and find the cause of all our troubles while she rested there by day and make an end of her. But those *sacré* fools of cemetery people, they would not hear of it. 'It are impossible,' they tell me, and I am balked.

"Then, tonight, when we find we are too late and the wicked *penanggalan* has worked her evil will on poor Mademoiselle Jeanne, I took the chance, played on the hunch, as you Americans say, and hastened to the graveyard to intercept them at Monsieur Haines' tomb. 'For if she really makes that grave her den, then it is probable that she will lead her victim to it, also,' I tell myself. It would be the height of evil vengeance to make the daughter house herself in the coffin with the body of her father. And she is vengeful, that one; eh, but she is vengeful as the devil's self. Yes, of course.

"We were fortunate. The wound which I had given her in my anger made her slow of flight, and so we got there first. We arrived in time to intercept them ere they could burrow out of sight. The rest you know."

"But," I persisted as we turned into my driveway, "how was it possible for the *penanggalan* to force her—its—way down through the earth and into that airtight coffin? The laws of physics——"

"Ah bah," he interrupted with a laugh, "I know not whether the laws of physics or of metaphysics govern in such cases; one thing I truly know, however: that is that we saw what we beheld with our own eyes tonight, and no one can say otherwise. And one more thing I know, as well: that is that at present I am greatly conscious of the workings of the law of impenetrability."

"Impenetrability?"

"But certainly, my friend. The proposition is most simple. This monstrous thirst of mine can not continue so to plague my throat when I have poured a pint or so of brandy down it. No, of course not."

"He leaped into the cold water, tense with the hope that the thing behind could not follow."

The Return of Andrew Bentley

By AUGUST W. DERLETH and MARK SCHORER

A weird shape with flaffing black cape strove to drag the body of Amos Wilder from the vault in which it had been laid

IT IS with considerable hesitation that I here chronicle the strange incidents which marked my short stay at the old Wilder homestead on the banks of the Wisconsin River not far from the rustic village of Sac Prairie. My reluctance is not entirely dispelled by the conviction that some record of these events should emphatically be made, if only to stop the circulation of unfounded rumors which have come into being since my departure from the vicinity.

The singular chain of events began with a peremptory letter from my aging uncle, Amos Wilder, ordering me to appear at the homestead, where he was then

living with a housekeeper and a caretaker. Communications from my Uncle Amos were not only exceedingly rare, but usually tinged with biting and withering comments about my profession of letters, which he held in great scorn. Previous to this note, we had not seen each other for over four years. His curt note hinted that there was something of vital importance to both of us which he wished to take up with me, and though I had no inkling of what this might be, I did not hesitate to go.

The old house was not large. It stood well back in the rambling grounds, its white surface mottled by the shadows of leafy branches in the warm sunlight of the day on which I arrived. Green shutters crowded upon the windows, and the door was tightly closed, despite the day's somnolent warmth. The river was cerulean and silver in the immediate background, and farther beyond, the bluffs on the other side of the river rose from behind the trees and were lost in the blue haze of distance to the north and south.

My uncle had grown incredibly old, and now hobbled about with the aid of a cane. On the morning of my arrival he was dressed in a long, ragged black robe that trailed along the floor; beneath this garment he wore a threadbare black jersey and a pair of shabby trousers. His hair was unkempt, and on his chin was a rough beard, masking his thin, sardonic mouth. His eyes, however, had lost none of their fire, and I felt his disapproval of me as clearly as ever. His expression was that of a man who is faced with an unpleasant but necessary task.

At last, after a rude scrutiny, he began to speak, having first made certain that no one lurked within earshot.

"It's hardly necessary for me to say I'm not too certain I've done a wise thing in choosing you," he began. "I've always considered you somewhat of a milksop, and you've done nothing to change my opinion."

He watched my face closely as he spoke, to detect any resentment that I might feel; but I had heard this kind of speech from him too often before to feel any active anger. He sensed this, apparently, for he went on abruptly.

"I'm going to leave everything I've got to you, but there'll be a condition. You'll have to spend most of your time here, make this your home, of course, and there are one or two other small things you'll have to see to. Mind, I'm not putting anything in my will; I want only your word. Do you think you can give it? Think you can say 'Yes' to my terms?"

He paused, and I said, "I see no reason why I shouldn't—if you can guarantee that your terms won't interfere with my writing."

My uncle smiled and shook his head as if in exasperation. "Nothing is easier," he replied curtly. "Your time for writing will be virtually unlimited."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Spend most of your time here, as I said before. Let no day go by during which you do not examine the vault behind the house. My body will lie there, and the vault will be sealed; I want to know that I can depend upon you to prevent anything from entering that vault. If at any time you discover that some one has been tampering, you will find written instructions for your further procedure in my library desk. Will you promise me to attend to these things without too much curiosity concerning them?"

I promised without the slightest hesitation, though there were perplexing thoughts crowding upon my mind.

Amos Wilder turned away, his eyes glittering. Then he looked through the

window directly opposite me and began to chuckle in a curiously guttural tone. At last he said, his eyes fixed upon a patch of blue sky beyond the tree near the window, "Good. I'll block him yet! Amos Wilder is still a match for you—do you hear, Andrew?"

What his words might portend I had no means of knowing, for he turned abruptly to me and said in his clipped, curt way, "You must go now, Ellis. I shall not see you again." With that, he left the room, and as if by magic, old Jacob Kinney, the caretaker, appeared to show me from the grounds, his lugubrious face regarding me with apologetic eyes from the doorway through which his master had so abruptly vanished but a moment before.

MY UNCLE'S strange words puzzled me, and it occurred to me that the old man was losing his mind. That I then did him an injustice I subsequently learned, but at the time all evidence pointed to mental derangement. I finally contented myself with this explanation, though it did not account for the old man's obvious rationality during most of the conversation. Two points struck me: my uncle had put particular stress upon the suggestion that something might enter his vault. And secondly, what was the meaning of his last words, and to whom was my uncle referring when he said, "I'll block him yet!" and "Amos Wilder is still a match for you—do you hear, Andrew?" Conjecture, however, was futile; for, since I knew very little of my uncle's personal affairs, any guesses I might have made as to his obscure references, if indeed he was not losing his mind, would be fruitless.

I left the old homestead that day in May only to find myself back there again within forty-eight hours, summoned by Thomas Weatherbee of Sac Prairie, my uncle's solicitor, whose short telegram apprising me of Amos Wilder's death reached me within three hours of my return to the St. Louis apartment which served me as my temporary home. My shock at the news of his sudden death was heightened when I learned that the circumstances surrounding his decease indicated suicide.

Weatherbee told me the circumstances of my uncle's singular death. It appeared that Jacob Kinney had found the old man in the very room in which he and I had discussed his wishes only a day before. He was seated at the table, apparently asleep. One hand still grasped a pen, and before him lay a sheet of note-paper upon which he had written my name and address, nothing more. It was presumed at first that he had had a heart attack, but a medical examination had brought forth the suspicion that the old man had made away with himself by taking an overdose of veronal. There was, however, considerable reluctance to presume suicide, for an overdose of veronal might just as likely be accident as suicide. Eventually a coroner's jury decided that my uncle had met his death by accident, but from the first I was convinced that Amos Wilder had killed himself. In the light of subsequent events and of his own cryptic words to me, "I shall not see you again," my suspicion was, I feel, justified, though no definite and conclusive evidence emerged.

MY UNCLE was buried, as he had wished, in the long-disused family vault behind the house, and the vault was sealed from the outside with due ceremony and in the presence of witnesses. The reading of the will was a short affair, for excepting bequests made to the housekeeper and caretaker, I inherited everything. My living was thus assured,

and as my uncle had said, I found the future holding many hours of leisure in which to pursue letters.

And yet, despite the apparent rosiness of the outlook, there was from the first a peculiar restraint upon my living in the old homestead. It was indefinable and strange, and numerous small incidents occurred to supplement this odd impression. First old Jacob Kinney wanted to leave. With great effort I persuaded him to stay, and dragged from him his reason for wanting to go.

"There've been mighty strange things a-goin' on about this house, Mr. Wilder, all the time your uncle was alive—and I'm afraid things'll be goin' on again after a bit."

More than that cryptic utterance I could not get out of him. I took the liberty shortly after to repeat Kinney's words to the housekeeper, Mrs. Seldon. The startled expression that passed over her countenance did not escape me, and her immediate assurance that Jake Kinney was in his dotage did not entirely reassure me.

Then there was the daily function of examining the seal on the vault. The absurdity of my uncle's request began to grow on me, and my task, trivial as it was, became daily more irritating. Yet, having given my promise, I could do no more than fulfill it.

ON THE third night following my uncle's interment, my sleep was troubled by a recurrent dream which gave me no little thought when I remembered its persistence on the following day. I dreamed that my Uncle Amos stood before me, clad as I had last seen him on the visit just preceding his strange death. He regarded me with his beady eyes, and then abruptly said in a mournful and yet urgent voice, "You must bring Burkhardt back here. He forgot to protect me against them. You must get him to do so. If he will not, then see those books on the second shelf of the seventh compartment of my library."

This dream was repeated several times, and it had a perfectly logical basis, which was briefly this: My uncle was buried by Father Burkhardt, the Sac Prairie parish priest, who was not satisfied with the findings of the coroner's jury, and consequently, in the belief that Amos Wilder had killed himself, had refused to bless the grave of a suicide. Yet, what the dream-shape of the night before had obviously meant when he spoke of what Father Burkhardt had forgotten to do, was the blessing of the grave.

I spent some time mulling over this solution of the dream, and at length went to see the priest. My efforts, however, were futile. The old man explained his attitude with great patience, and I was forced to agree with him.

On the following night the dream recurred, and in consequence, since a visit to Father Burkhardt had already failed to achieve the desired effect, I turned, impelled largely by curiosity, to the books on the second shelf of the seventh compartment indicated by the dream-figure of my uncle. From the moment that I opened the first of those books, the entire complexion of the occurrences at the homestead changed inexplicably, and I found myself involved in a chain of incidents, the singularity of which continues to impress me even as I write at this late date. For the books on the second shelf of the seventh compartment in my dead uncle's library were books on black magic —books long out of print, and apparently centuries old, for in many of them the print had faded almost to illegibility.

The Latin in which most of the books were written was not easily translated, but fortunately it was not necessary for

me to search long for the portions indicated by my uncle, for in each book paragraphs were marked for my attention. The subjects of the marked portions were strangely similar. After some difficulty I succeeded in translating the first indicated paragraph to catch my eye. "For Protection from Things That Walk in the Night," it read. "There are many things stalking abroad by darkness, perhaps ghouls, perhaps evil demons lured from outer space by man's own ignorance, perhaps souls isolated in space, havenless and alone, and yet strongly attached to the things of this earth. Let no bodies be exposed to their evil wrath. Let there be all manner of protection for vaults and graves, for the dead as well as the living; for ghouls, incubi, and succubi haunt the near places as well as the far, and seek always to quench the fire of their unholy desire. . . . Take blessed water from a church and mix it with the blood of a young babe, be it ever so small a measure, and with this cross the grave or the door of the vault thrice at the full of the moon."

If this was what my Uncle Amos desired me to do, I knew at once that the task had devolved upon the wrong man; for I could certainly not see myself going about collecting holy water and the blood of a young child and then performing ridiculous rites over the vault with an odious mixture of the two. I put the books aside and returned to my work, which seemed suddenly more inviting than it had ever been before.

Yet what I had read disturbed me, and the suggestion that my uncle had come to believe in the power of black magic—perhaps even more than this, for all I knew—was extremely distasteful to me. In consequence, my writing suffered, and immediately after my supper that evening, I went for a long walk on the river bank.

A HALF-MOON high in the sky made the countryside bright and clear, and since the night was balmy and made doubly inviting by the sweet mystery of night sounds—the gasping and gurgling of the water, the splashing of distant fish, the muted cries of night-birds, particularly the *peet, peet* of the nighthawk and the eery call of the whippoorwill, and the countless mysterious sounds from the underbrush in the river bottoms—I extended my walk much farther than I had originally intended; so that it was shortly after midnight when I approached the house again, and the moon was close upon the western horizon.

As I came quietly along in the now still night, my eye caught a movement in the shadowy distance. The movement had come from the region of the large old elm which pressed close upon the house near the library window, and it was upon this tree that I now fixed my eyes. I had not long to wait, for presently a shadow detached itself from the giant bole and went slowly around the house toward the darkness behind. I could see the figure quite clearly, though I did not once catch sight of its face, despite the fact that the man, for man it was, wore no hat. He walked with a slight limp, and wore a long black cape. He was near medium height, but quite bent, so that his back was unnaturally hunched. His hands were strikingly white in the fading light of the moon, and he walked with a peculiar flaffing motion, despite his obvious limp. He passed beyond the house with me at his heels, for I was determined to ascertain if possible what design had brought him to the old house.

I lost sight of him for a few moments while I gained the shelter of the house, but in a minute I saw him again, and with a gasp of astonishment realized that he was making directly for the vault in

which my Uncle Amos lay buried. I stifled an impulse to shout at him, and made my way cautiously in the shadow of a row of lilac bushes toward the vault, before which he was now standing. The darkness here was intense, owing to the fact that the trees from the surrounding copse pressed close upon this corner of the estate; yet I could see from my crouching position that the mysterious intruder was fumbling with the seals of the vault. My purpose in following him so closely was to collar him while he was engaged with the seals, but this design was now for the moment thwarted by his stepping back to survey the surface of the vault door. He remained standing in silence for some while, and I had almost decided that it might be just as easy to capture him in this position, when he moved forward once more. But this time he did not fumble with the seals. Instead, he seemed to flatten himself against the door of the vault. Then, incredible as it may seem, his figure began to grow smaller, to shrink, save for his gaunt and gleaming white fingers and arms!

With a strangled gasp, I sprang forward.

My memory at this point is not quite clear. I remember seizing the outstretched fingers of the man at the vault door, feeling something within my grasp. Then something struck me at the same moment that the intruder whirled and leaped away. I had the fleeting impression that a second person had leaped upon me from behind. I went down like a log.

I CAME to my senses not quite an hour later, and lay for a moment recalling what had happened. I remembered having made a snatch at the intruder's fingers, and being struck. There was an appreciable soreness of the head, and a sensitive bruise on my forehead when finally I felt for it. But what most drew my attention was the thing that I held tightly in my left hand, the hand which had grasped at the strangely white fingers of the creature pressed against the door of the Wilder vault. I had felt it within my grasp from the first moment of consciousness, but from its roughness, I had taken it for a small twig caught up from the lawn. In consequence, it was not until I reached the security of the house that I looked at it. I threw it upon the table in the dim glow of the table lamp—and almost fell in my utter amazement; for the thing I had held in my hand was a fragment of human bone—the unmistakable first two joints of the little finger!

This discovery loosed a flood of futile conjectures. Was it after all a man I had surprized at the vault, or was it—something else? . . . That my uncle was in some way vitally concerned now became apparent, if it had not been entirely so before. The fact that Amos Wilder had looked for some such interruption of his repose in the old vault led me to believe that whatever he feared derived from some source in the past. Accordingly, I gave up all conjecture for the time, and promised myself that in the morning I would set on foot inquiries designed to make me familiar with my secluded uncle's past life.

I was destined to receive a shock in the morning. Determined to prosecute my curiosity concerning my uncle without loss of time, I summoned Jacob Kinney, whose surliness had noticeably increased during the few days I had been at the old Wilder house. Instead of asking directly about my uncle, I began with a short account of the figure I had seen outside the preceding night.

"I was out quite late last night, Jake,"

I began, "and when I came home I noticed a stranger on the grounds."

Kinney's eyebrows shot up in undisguised curiosity, but he said nothing, though he began to exhibit signs of uneasiness which did not escape my notice.

"He was about five feet tall, I should say, and wore no hat," I went on. "He wore a long black cape, and walked with a slight limp."

Abruptly Kinney came to his feet, his eyes wide with fear. "What's that you say?" he demanded hoarsely. "Walked with a limp—wore a cape?"

I nodded, and would have continued my narrative, had not Kinney cut in.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "Andrew Bentley's back!"

"Who's Andrew Bentley?" I asked.

But Kinney did not hear. He had whirled abruptly and run from the room as fast as his feeble legs would allow him to go. My astonishment knew no bounds, nor did subsequent events in any way lessen it; for Jacob Kinney ran not only from the house, but from the grounds, and his flight was climaxed shortly after by the appearance of a begrimed youth representing himself as the old man's nephew, who came for "Uncle Jake's things." From him I learned that Kinney was leaving his position at once, and would forfeit any wages due him, plus any amount I thought fit to recompense me for his precipitate flight.

KINNEY'S unaccountable action served only to sharpen my already keen interest, and I descended upon Mrs. Seldon post-haste. But the information which she was able to offer me was meager indeed. Andrew Bentley had arrived in the neighborhood only a few years back. He and my uncle had immediately become friends, and the friendship, despite an appearance of strain, had ended only when Bentley mysteriously disappeared about a year ago. She confirmed my description of the figure I had seen as that of Bentley. Mrs. Seldon, too, was inexplicably agitated, and when I sought to probe for the source of this agitation she said only that there were some very strange stories extant about Bentley, and about my uncle as well, and that most of the people in the neighborhood had been relieved of a great fear when Bentley disappeared from the farm adjoining the Wilder estate. This farm, which he had inhabited for the years of his residence, but had not worked, and had yet always managed to exist without trouble, was now uninhabited. This, together with a passing hint that Thomas Weatherbee might be able to add something, was the sum of what Mrs. Seldon knew.

I lost no time in telephoning Weatherbee and making an appointment for that afternoon. On the way to the attorney's office I had ample time to think over the events of the last ten days. That it was Andrew Bentley whom my Uncle Amos had referred to when he spoke so cryptically with me before his death, I had no longer any doubt. Evidently then, he, too, feared his strange neighbor, but how he hoped to thwart any attempt that Bentley might make to get the body—for what reason he might want it I could not guess—with black magic, was beyond my comprehension.

THOMAS WEATHERBEE was a short and rather insignificant man, but his attitude was conducive to business, and he made clear to me that he had only a limited time at my disposal. I came directly to the matter of Andrew Bentley.

"Andrew Bentley," began Weatherbee with some reluctance, "was a man with whom I had no dealings, with whom I cared to have none. I have seldom met

any one whose mere presence was so innately evil. Your uncle took up with him, it is true, but I believe he regretted it to the end of his days."

"What exactly was wrong with Bentley?" I cut in.

Weatherbee smiled grimly, regarded me speculatively for a moment or two, and said, "Bentley was an avowed sorcerer."

"Oh, come," I said; "that sort of thing isn't believed in any more." But a horrible suspicion began to grow in my mind.

"Perhaps not generally," replied Weatherbee at once. "But I can assure you that most of us around here believe in the power of black magic after even so short an acquaintance as ours with Andrew Bentley. Consider for a moment that you have spent the greater part of your life in a modern city, away from the countrysides where such beliefs flourish, Wilder."

He stopped with an abrupt gesture, and took a portfolio from a cabinet. From this he took a photograph, looked at it with a slight curl of disgust on his lips, and passed it over to me.

It was a snapshot, apparently made surreptitiously, of Andrew Bentley, and it had been taken evidently at considerable risk after sunset, for the general appearance of the picture led me to assume that its vagueness was caused by the haziness of dusk—a supposition which Weatherbee confirmed. The figure, however, was quite clear, save for blurred arms, which had evidently been moving during the exposure, and for the head. The view had been taken from the side, and showed Andrew Bentley, certainly identified for me by the long cape he wore, standing as if in conversation with some one. Yet it struck me as strange that Bentley could have stood quietly during the exposure with no incentive to do so, and I commented upon it at once.

Weatherbee looked at me queerly. "Wilder," he said, "there was another person there—or should I say *thing?* And this thing was directly in line with the lens, for he was standing very close to Bentley—and yet, there is nothing on the snapshot, nor is there any evidence on the exposed negative itself that any one stood there; for, as you can see, the landscape is unbroken."

It was as he said.

"But this other person," I put in. "He was seen, and yet does not appear. Apparently the camera was out of focus, or the film was defective."

"On the contrary. There are logical explanations for the non-appearance of something on a film. You can't photograph a dream. And you can't photograph something that has no material form—I say *material* advisedly—even though our own eyes give that thing a physical being."

"What do you mean?"

"Father Burkhardt would call it a familiar," he said, clipping his words. "A familiar, in case you don't know, is an evil spirit summoned by a sorcerer to wait upon his desires. That tall, gaunt man was never seen by day—always by night, and never without Bentley. I can give you no more of my time now, but if you can bring yourself to accept what I have to say at face value, I'll be glad to see you again."

My interview with Thomas Weatherbee left me considerably shaken, and I found myself discarding all my previously formed beliefs regarding black magic. I went immediately to my late uncle's store of books, and began to read through them for further information, in the hope that something I might learn would enable me to meet Andrew Bentley on more equal footing, should he choose to call.

I READ until far into the night, and what inconceivable knowledge I assimilated lingers clearly in my mind as I write. I read of age-old horror summoned from the abyss by the ignorance of men, of cosmic ghouls that roamed the ether in search of prey, and of countless things that walk by night. There were many legends of familiars, ghastly demons called forth from the depths at the whims of long-dead sorcerers; and it was significant that each legend had been heavily scored along the margins, and in one case the name "Andrew Bentley" was written in my uncle's hand. In another place my uncle had written, "We are fools to play with powers of whose scope even the wisest of us has no knowledge!"

It was at this point that it occurred to me that my uncle had left a letter of sealed instructions for me in case the vault was tampered with. This letter was to be in the library desk, where I found it with little trouble, a long, legal-looking envelope with my name inscribed very formally. The handwriting was undoubtedly my uncle's, and the letter within was the thing that finally dispelled all doubt from my mind as to the reality of the sorcery that had been and was still being practised near the Wilder homestead; for it made clear what had happened between my uncle and Andrew Bentley—and that other.

"My dear Ellis:

"If indeed they have come for me, as they must have if you read this, there is but one thing you can do. Bentley's body must be found and utterly destroyed; surely there can not be much left of it now. Perhaps you have seen him in the night when he walks—as I have. He is not alive. I know, because I killed him a year ago—stabbed him with your grandfather's hunting-knife—which must yet lie in his black skeleton.

"I think both Burkhardt and Weatherbee suspected that I aided Bentley in his black rites, but that was long before I dreamed of what depths of evil lurked in his soul. And when he began to hound me so, when he brought forward that other, that hellish thing he had conjured up from the nethermost places of evil—could I do otherwise than rid myself of his evil presence? My mind was at stake—and yes, my body. When you read this, only my body is at stake. For they want it—conceive if you can the ghastly irony of my lifeless body given an awful new existence by being inhabited by Bentley's familiar!

"The body—Bentley's body—I put it in the vault, but that other removed it and hid it somewhere on the grounds. I have not been able to find it, and this past year has been a living hell for me—they have hounded me nightly, and though I can protect myself from them, I can not stop them from appearing to taunt me. And when I am dead, my protection must come from you. But I hope that Burkhardt will have closed his eyes and blessed the vault, for this I think will be strong enough to keep them away—and yet, I can not tell.

"And perhaps even this is being read too late—for if once they have my body, destroy me, too, with Bentley's remains—by fire.

"AMOS WILDER."

I put down this letter and sat for a moment in silence. But what thoughts crowded upon my mind were interrupted by an odd sound from outside the window, a sound that was unnaturally striking in the still night. I glanced at my watch; it was one o'clock in the morning. Then I turned out the small reading-lamp and moved quietly toward the window, immediately beyond which stood the giant elm beneath which on the previous night

I had first seen the ghostly figure of Andrew Bentley—for since he had been killed a year before, what I had seen could have been none other than his specter.

Then a thought struck me that paralyzed me with horror. Suppose I had been struck by *that other?* It seemed to me that the blow which had knocked me out had been struck from behind. At the same instant my eyes caught sight of the faintest movement beyond the window. The moon hung in a hazy sky and threw a faint illumination about the tree, despite the fairly heavy shadow of its overhanging limbs. There was a man pressed close to the bole of the tree, and even as I looked another seemed to rise up out of the ground at his side. And the second man was Andrew Bentley! I looked again at the first, and saw a tall, gaunt figure with malevolent red eyes, *through* whom I could see the line of moonlight and shadow on the lawn beyond the tree. They stood there together for only a moment, and then went quickly around the house —toward the vault!

FROM that instant events moved rapidly to a climax.

My eyes fixed themselves upon that place in the ground from which the figure of Andrew Bentley had sprung, and saw there an opening in the trunk of the old tree—for the elm was hollow, and its bole held the remains of Andrew Bentley! Small wonder that my uncle had been haunted by the presence of the man he had killed, when his remains were hidden in the tree near the library window!

But I stood there only for a fraction of a minute. Then I went quickly to the telephone, and after an agonizing delay got Weatherbee on the wire and asked him to come out at once, hinting enough of what was happening to gain his assent. I suggested also that he bring Father Burkhardt along, and this he promised to do.

Then I slipped silently from the house into the shadowy garden. I think the sight of those two unholy figures hovering about the door of the vault was too much for me, for I launched myself at them, heedless of my danger. But realization came almost instantly, for Andrew Bentley did not even turn at my appearance. Instead, the other looked abruptly around, fixed me with his red and fiery eyes, smiled wickedly so that his leathery face was weirdly creased, and leisurely watched my approach. Instinct, I believe, whirled me about and sent me flying from the garden.

The thing was somewhat surprized at my abrupt bolt, and this momentary hesitation on its part I continue to believe is responsible for my being alive to write this. For I knew that I was flying for my life, and I ran with the utmost speed of which I was capable. A fleeting glance showed me that the thing loped after me, a weirdly flaffing shape seeming to come with the wind in the moonlight night, and struck shuddery horror into my heart.

I made for the river, because I remembered reading in one of my uncle's old books that certain familiars could not cross water unless accompanied by those whose sorcery had summoned them to earth. I leaped into the cold water, tense with the hope that the thing behind could not follow.

It could not.

I saw it raging up and down along the river bank, impotent and furious at my fortunate escape, while I kept myself afloat in mid-current. The current carried me rapidly downstream, and I kept my eyes fixed upon the thing I had eluded until it turned and sped back toward the vault. Only when I was completely out

of its sight did I make for the bank once more.

I ran madly down the road along which Weatherbee and the priest must come, flinging off some of my wet clothes as I went. What was happening at the vault I did not know—at the moment my only thought was temporary safety from the thing whose power I had so thoughtlessly challenged.

I HAD gone perhaps a half-mile beyond the estate when the headlights of Weatherbee's car swept around a curve and outlined me in the road. The car ground to an emergency stop, and Weatherbee's voice called out. I jumped into the car, and explained as rapidly as I could what had happened.

Father Burkhardt regarded me quizzically, half smiling.

"You've had a narrow escape, my boy," he said, "a very narrow escape. Now if only we can get to the vault before they succeed in their evil design. Such a fate is too harsh a punishment even for the sins of Amos Wilder."

He shuddered as he spoke, and Weatherbee's face was grim.

None of us wasted a moment when the car came to a stop near the house. Father Burkhardt, despite his age, led the way, marshaling us behind him, for he went ahead with a crucifix extended.

But even he faltered at the horrifying sight that met our eyes when we rounded the house and came into the garden. For the vault was open, and from it emerged the skeletal Bentley and his familiar, and between them they dragged the lifeless body of my Uncle Amos! Burkhardt's hesitation, however, was only momentary, for he ran forward immediately; nor were Weatherbee and I far behind.

At the same moment the two at the vault caught sight of us. With a shrill scream, the tall, gaunt thing loosed his hold of the corpse and launched himself forward. But the crucifix served us well, for the thing fell shuddering away from it. Father Burkhardt immediately pressed his advantage, and following his sharp command, Weatherbee and I rushed at Bentley, who had up to this moment remained beside the corpse, still keeping hold of one dead arm.

But at our advance, Bentley wavered a moment, and then turned and took flight, dodging nimbly past us and running for the house. We were at his heels, and saw him when he vanished in the deep shadows of the tree near the library window.

Father Burkhardt presently made his appearance, walking warily, for the thing was still at bay but eager to attack.

"Find the bones," directed the priest. "They're in the tree, I suspect."

I bent obediently, and presently my searching hand encountered a scooped-out hollow in the trunk just above the opening at the base of the tree. In this lay the skeleton of Andrew Bentley, together with the weapon by which he had met his death, and here it had lain ever since the thing Bentley had summoned from the depths had removed the sorcerer's body from the old vault. Small wonder that it had never been discovered!

Father Burkhardt stood protectingly close while Weatherbee and I prepared a pyre to consume the remains of the sorcerer.

"But what can we do about that?" I asked once, pointing to the familiar that now raged in baffled fury just beyond us.

"We need not bother about that," said the priest. "He is held to earth only by the body of the man who summoned him from below. When once that body is destroyed, he must return. That's why they were after your uncle's body. If the fa-

miliar could inhabit a body fresh from a new grave, he could walk by day as well as by night, and need have no fear of having to return."

Once or twice the thing did rush at us —but each time its charge was arrested by the power of that crucifix held unfalteringly aloft by Father Burkhardt, and each time the thing shrank away, wailing.

It was over at last, but not without a short period of ghastly doubt. The remains of Andrew Bentley were reduced to ashes, utterly destroyed, and yet the thing Bentley had called from outside lingered beyond us, strangely quiet now, regarding us malevolently.

"I don't understand," admitted Father Burkhardt at last. "Now that Bentley's ashes alone remain, the thing should go back into the depths."

But if the priest did not understand, I did. Abruptly I ran to the library window, raised it as far as it would go, and scrambled into the room. In a moment I emerged, bearing the fragment of Bentley's little finger which I had snatched from the skeletal hand the night before. I threw it into the flames already dying down in the shadow of the tree.

In a moment it had caught fire, and at the same instant the thing hovering near gave a chilling scream of pain and fury, pushed madly toward us, and then abruptly shot into space and vanished like the last fragment of an unholy, ghastly nightmare.

"Requiescat in pace," said Father Burkhardt softly, looking at the ashes at our feet. But the dubious expression in his eyes conveyed his belief that for the now released spirit of Andrew Bentley a greater and longer torture had just begun.

Golden Blood

By JACK WILLIAMSON

A novel of weird adventures in the hidden land of Arabia, and a golden folk that ride upon a golden-yellow tiger and worship a golden snake

The Story Thus Far

DYNAMITING their schooner behind them upon the south coast of Arabia, a little band of desperate adventurers plunged into the hostile mystery of the Rub' Al Khali, cruelest and least-known desert of the earth. Their leaders were Price Durand, wealthy American soldier of fortune, Jacob Garth, enigmatic Englishman, and Joao de Castro, unsavory Macanese.

Equipped with an army tank, machine-guns, mountain artillery, and airplanes, and accompanied by the sheikh Fouad el Akmet and his renegade Bedouins, they are raiding the forbidden "golden land," which is guarded by the uncanny scientific powers of its weird rulers, the "golden folk"—a man, an exotic woman, a huge, domesticated tiger, and a gigantic snake, all four of which have been transformed, by breathing yellow vapors ris-

This story began in WEIRD TALES for April

"The serpent whipped a gleaming coil about the tiger's thick body."

ing from a volcanic fissure in a mountain where they dwell, into eternal yellow metal, immortally alive.

Price fell in love with Aysa, a strange, lovely fugitive, and fought de Castro for her. She was abducted by Malikar, the golden man; and Price, venturing into the mountain in quest of her, found her sleeping in the yellow vapor, being herself turned to gold! He learned that the insidious Malikar was planning to make her his consort, in place of Vekyra, the golden woman.

Captured, Price was thought to be the reincarnation of Iru, a long-dead king, because he carried the golden weapons of that ruler, which he had found in an old tomb. Vekyra told him that Iru was once her lover, begged him to help her destroy Malikar and Aysa, to become himself a man of gold, and reign for ever with her.

Price refused. Escaping from her palace with Fouad el Akmet, who was also a prisoner there, he discovered that Vekyra was following them, to avenge her wounded vanity, riding upon the gigantic golden tiger.

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27. *The Camp in the Wadi*

PRICE and the old Bedouin both ran when the golden tiger screamed. In the thin, uncanny ululation was some quality that shattered the nerves and woke blind, atavistic terrors. They were no longer reasoning beings. That squalling cry, with all that it meant, made them mere frightened animals.

Together they ran across the livid, moon-washed lava flows, nerved by fear to almost superhuman exertions. When Price came to himself, red pain seared his laboring lungs; every breath had become a sobbing gasp. Hot sweat drenched him; the night was suddenly oppressive; his limbs were stiff and leaden.

He made himself stop. The oasis was a dozen miles away; to reach it ahead of the tiger was an obvious impossibility.

The mad flight was gaining him nothing; it was serving only to increase Vekyra's pleasure in her diabolically planned revenge.

Price dropped, panting, on his stomach behind a jagged knob of black lava. Fouad ran on, howling out at every leap a frantic appeal to Allah and his prophet.

From the shadow of the rock, Price looked back across the dark, barren, argent-lit plain, toward the mountain, watched the vague yellow form, appearing and dissolving in the ghostly mantle of the moonlight. Zor, the golden tiger; Vekyra riding on his trail.

He lay quiet, fondling the helve of the golden ax. It was madness, of course, to think of battling the elephantine tiger, but no more suicidal than flight; and he always felt better fighting than running.

He watched the tiger running with smooth, effortless strength, as if it floated upon the waves of white moonlight. It came straight toward him, then turned a little. He heard Vekyra's triumphant view-halloo, a pealing silver shout.

She had seen him. No. It must be Fouad. In the shadow of the rock, he must be yet invisible to her. But she would certainly discover him as she came nearer. And the great yellow cat, if it trailed by scent——

His thought was broken off by a sudden rattle of rifle-fire, from the direction Fouad had taken. Bullets hummed and whined above his head, singing toward the tiger.

The running beast stopped suddenly, stood motionless. It was not five hundred yards away. Price could see the *howdah*, and Vekyra sitting in it. She stood up, looked for a moment after Fouad, with the bullets whistling about her.

Then she crouched low; the tiger turned and fled. The yellow bulk of it paused for an instant upon a distant ridge; then it seemed to melt away in the moonlight.

Price got to his feet, swearing in astonished relief. The abrupt reaction to his extreme nervous tension of a few moments before made him feel curiously weak and shaken. He had an odd desire to laugh.

Cunning as Vekyra's plot had been, to raise the hopes of her victims by allowing them to make that miraculous escape, then to run them down upon the tiger, she had bungled it. She had actually given them the freedom with which she had planned to tantalize them.

Walking in the direction Fouad had fled, Price came soon in view of half a dozen men, rifles in hand, standing about the old Arab. One of them challenged him; he shouted out his name, and old Sam Sorrows, the rangy, long-faced Kansan, came hastening to meet him.

"Howdy, Mr. Durand," he called, surprized. And when he was nearer: "What's it all about, anyhow?"

"The lady on the tiger was out for a bit of sport. Hunting, with Fouad and me for the game. Lucky we ran into you."

"Maybe." Sam Sorrows lowered his voice to a whisper. "Better keep an eye peeled for that half-breed de Castro, Mr. Durand. The skunk hasn't actually loved you, ever since you took that girl out of his yellow hands. Say, have you found out anything——"

"Yes, Sam, I saw her. Down in the mountain. That golden devil, Malikar—he's turning *her* to gold. But about de Castro?"

"Well, he doesn't worship the ground you walk on. And the men are pretty well with him. And—well, you see—that is to say——"

The old man paused, doubtful, fumbling his Lebel in the moonlight.

"What is it, Sam?"

"Well, Mr. Durand, you see—anyhow, *we saw you yesterday, in the mirage.*"

"Oh!" Price recalled his weird experience in the hall of illusion. "What of it?"

"Well, sir, I don't like to say it. But it was plain to see you and the yellow woman were spying on us. Looked like she was on pretty good terms with you. The men were saying——"

"Saying what?" Price prompted him again.

"Of course *I* don't doubt you, Mr. Durand." Price was shocked to note the faintest uncertainty in the old man's tones, as if he were not quite convinced. "But the men think you've sold us out. De Castro was making some unpleasant remarks about what would happen if we got hold of you again. Thought I'd put you on guard."

"Thanks, Sam." Price squeezed his gnarled hand.

"You'll have to talk, sir. It looks queer, you happening to run into us this way, with the woman making out to chase you. The men will think you planned the thing, to get back in camp, and find out what we're planning."

"But Fouad was with me, too."

"What does he amount to?" The old Kansan turned back toward the others. "Good luck, sir. Remember, I'm *for* you."

IN A shallow *wadi* beyond the ridge Price found a small, fireless camp. There were no tents. The white men, an even score of them, were mostly sprawled or squatting about the camel packs. Fouad's Arabs, now numbering a little over thirty, were gathered in a clamoring group about their new-returned sheikh. Close about were the dromedaries, kneeling or awkwardly sprawling. And the gray, silent bulk of the tank.

Jacob Garth came to meet Price, as Sam Sorrows walked with him past the little group of sentinels on the ridge. A huge, gross man, his fat head bared to the night breeze, his *topi* slung about his neck.

"Don't trust him too far," the lanky Kansan whispered again. "He'll do anything to humor de Castro and the men—till he gets the gold in his own fat hands!"

The man was near; Price did not reply.

"So *you're* back again, Durand?" boomed Garth's voice, sonorous and emotionless as ever.

"Yes."

"Doesn't it occur to you that you have been deserting and appearing again rather too often to be convincing?"

"I think not. I can explain."

"You can explain why we saw you in the mirage yesterday morning? And on evidently intimate terms with the golden woman—whom you now pretend to be running away from?"

"Yes."

"Go ahead."

"Listen, Garth. You may think me a traitor. I admit that I did have a chance—or rather two chances—to double-cross you. I was running from that tiger because I didn't do it. Garth, I've been pretty well through the mountain. I know a good deal, I imagine, that might be useful, if you are planning another attack on the mountain—I suppose you are?"

"So it's both ends against the middle, eh?"

Price flushed, struggled to control his voice.

"Garth, I have given you no reason to doubt my honor. I'll tell you honestly what I have learned about our enemies. But first I must have assurance that you

—and your men—will respect my life and freedom."

Pale and icy in the moonlight, the man's eyes glittered at Price from the broad white mask of his pouchy face.

"Very well, Durand," he said at length. "I'll tell you this much: We are striking about sunrise. In a few minutes Sam Sorrows is riding back to El Yermin with orders for the planes. They're to bomb the castle. That will finish that accursed mirage?"

"If they can hit the machine. A complicated lot of mirrors and such in the dome of the highest tower."

"Good. Your information may be worth while, after all. With the planes, the tank, and the guns, we can smash any other opposition. We are going to dynamite our way into the mountain. You tell me what you know. Go over the plan with me. I'll promise you safety. But I'll want to keep you under guard until after the battle."

"One other thing——" began Price.

"You thinking about that girl? Well, Mr. Durand, you had better understand right now that I've promised her to de Castro, if we happen to come across her. You'll have to forget her."

"The injustice of the thing——"

"Justice isn't worrying me, Durand. Gold is what I'm after. Tell me your story, if you like, and I'll give you protection from the men. If you don't like it, I'll turn you over to de Castro. He'd like well enough to twist a knife in you. He's asleep. Shall I call him?"

Argument was in vain; Price at last submitted. He was still relating the tale of his adventures, and describing the interior passages of the mountain, when there was a sudden stir among the sentries on the ridge above the camp. A warning shot, a shouted challenge.

"Jacob Garth! Jacob Garth! Jacob Garth!"

A silver voice was pealing through the moonlight. Vekyra's voice. Price's heart thudded. What did this mean?

"Come along." Garth took his arm. They went back to the crest. Two hundred yards across the moon-bathed lava stood Vekyra, a vague figure, almost spectral in the argent light. She was on foot; the tiger was not visible.

"Is that *she?*" Garth asked Price.

"Yes. The golden woman. Name's Vekyra."

"What do you want?" Garth bellowed in Arabic.

The liquid voice floated back, "Jacob Garth! Jacob Garth!"

The big man hesitated. He looked back at the camp, and then peered around over the tawny, white-lit desert. His voice rolled out suddenly, calm, serene as always:

"I'm going out to talk to her. If anything goes wrong, shoot. And keep *him* here." He nodded at Price. "Take good care of him; he may be useful."

Jacob Garth strode out across the desert. The sentries stood ready on the hill, Price among them. They saw Garth stop as he came near the woman; heard a faint murmur of voices. The two presently moved a little farther away, and sat down on the ground, face to face.

It was nearly an hour later that they rose. The woman's ghostly form ran fleetly away, until it dissolved in the moonlight, reappeared, and was gone. Jacob Garth stalked deliberately back to the sentries. Though all of them must have been bursting with curiosity, none dared address him.

"Did you satisfy yourself about my status with the woman?" asked Price.

Garth looked at him, rumbled slowly,

"Yes, Durand. You must have played the fool with *her*. Come here."

The man led him a little away from the sentries, lowered his voice:

"Durand, we won't be needing you any further. And I'm convinced, from what the woman tells me, that you won't—can't—do us any harm. You can go."

"Go?" asked Price, blankly.

"Get out of camp, as you came. And the quicker the better. Joao de Castro doesn't like you. And the woman doesn't. Better get out while you can."

He turned to the sentries, and boomed:

"Mr. Durand is leaving us, men. Give him ten minutes to get out of bullet range."

28. *The Sentinel Serpent*

"SORRY it's happening this way, Mr. Durand," grinned Sam Sorrows. "But it might have been worse."

He had gone down to his kneeling camel. He brought Price a small metal canteen full of water, stuffed his pockets with dates, dried camel-flesh, and hard-tack.

"That will see you back to the oasis, sir. And good luck."

Tears were almost in Price's eyes as he gripped the old Kansan's hand, and walked away beneath the menacing rifles of the sentries.

Half a mile away, a lava ridge intervened, shut him from sight of camp and sentries. He strode moodily along, through the swarthy and hostile loneliness of the moonlit lava-desert. He had fumbled everything; his last chance was gone.

But it was not in Price's nature to quit. He never seriously intended to go meekly back to the oasis, as the others had supposed he would. And the desperate plan flashed suddenly into his mind.

He knew a way into the mountain—the way along which the unwilling snake-man, Kreor, had once guided him. He remembered it well enough to follow it alone. It might be guarded, now, but he could take the risk. And he still had the golden ax.

Within the mountain were perils that he did not like to contemplate. The fanatic acolytes of Malikar. The insidious golden man himself. The yellow snake, that he would have to pass to reach Aysa—he shuddered again at memory of the cold, ancient evil that burned hypnotic in the serpent's eyes.

Most of all, he dreaded the aureate mist. The sinister sleep of the golden vapor had overwhelmed him on the other occasion. Even if he escaped all the other dangers, he would not have time to reach Aysa and carry her above it before it overcame him.

But perhaps he could devise some sort of protection! A rude gas mask. He ransacked his knowledge of such things. The masks used against first German attacks, at Ypres, he recalled, were mere dampened cloths. A wet cloth would be worth trying, at any rate. If the yellow gas united with or replaced the water in the human body, it must have a special affinity for it.

Filled with new hope that ignored the overwhelming chances against the success of this newest enterprise, he hastened westward, circled around the west side of the mountain. Weary after a strenuous night, he flung himself down when he reached the point where Kreor and he had begun the climb up the sheer north precipice, and rested the hour until dawn, though he dared not sleep.

Sunrise found him toiling painfully and perilously up the cliff. Droning of airplane motors reached his ears, then thuds of heavy explosions that seemed to

come to him through the very rock of the mountain.

Garth, then, had attacked; with Vekyra, probably, as an ally. Price's heart sank at a vision of what would happen, in that case, if they reached the place of the snake ahead of him. Aysa, hated as she was by Vekyra, might meet a fate worse than Joan's embrace.

At last he reached the fissure, slipped through into the dark, winding caverns of the mountain. Soon he was beyond all light, with nothing to guide him save memory. Many times he stumbled painfully against rugged, sharp-edged stone. But at last he came into the larger cavern, and through it, into the first hewn passage.

Onward, he found his way with comparative ease, counting his paces, and turning as he and Kreor had turned. He came finally into the sloping, spiral way, and hastened downward, still through utter darkness.

Again the mass of the mountain quivered to an explosion. Then, for a few moments, he heard confused shouting, and the distant rattle of small arms, borne to him down some corridor.

He had expected to meet watchmen. But perhaps the entire forces of Malikar had been drawn to some other part of the passage, to oppose the entrance of Jacob Garth and Vekyra. And, as he was to discover, Malikar had left a sentinel more terrible than any human.

SOUNDS of fighting ceased, and he came finally into air that was suffused with the faintest possible yellow light. Steadily it grew brighter as he descended, until he passed the end of the passage leading to the gallery from which he first had seen the lair of the snake.

There the light of sparkling, dancing golden atoms was strong in the air, the walls of the passage all a-glitter with rime of yellow crystals, elfin tracery of xanthic frost.

The passage flattened, straightened, and he came once more into the vast temple hall. The wonder of it smote him again. Circular, high-domed room, thick with shimmering yellow vapor, its black stone walls crusted with glittering gold.

A furious hissing roar greeted him as he ran out upon the vast, xanthic-frosted floor that lay between the entrance and the narrow bridge that spanned the giddy, green-golden abyss.

Leaping back in alarm, he saw the golden snake, coiled between him and the bridge that was the way to Aysa.

The reptile's thick coils were gathered in a conical heap. Every scale shone xanthic yellow, glittering, metallic. The tapering gold column of its neck was lifted. Ten feet above the floor, its vast flat head swayed back and forth as it hissed.

Price stared for a moment, fascinated again by those terrible eyes. The ugly head was gold-hooded, triangular. The vast, yellow-fanged mouth yawned wide as it hissed with such startling volume of sound.

The eyes transfixed him. Dreadful eyes. Purple-black, glowing with strange fire of age-old, evil wisdom. Hard and fascinating as giant gems. Price found himself unconsciously responding with his own body to the swaying of the eyes, felt the chill of them stealing into his body, freezing his limbs, choking him, oppressing his breathing, slowing his heart.

Desperately he fought against the power of the snake. Once, when the reptile appeared in the mirage, he had broken free. He could again! And he had seen Malikar overcome the snake,

whip it into submission. The serpent itself was not immune to fear.

Calling upon every atom of his will to lift each foot, Price walked stiffly, unsteadily, like a mechanical doll, directly toward the snake. Awkwardly, he raised the yellow ax, with numb and nerveless hands. Malikar, he remembered suddenly, had shouted at the snake.

Price found his throat dry, his voice a hoarse croaking. But he began gasping out the ax-song of Iru, in short, harsh phrases.

The undulatory motion of the flat head ceased. It drew back, and, still hissing, struck at him. Price called upon flagging muscles to fling up the oval buckler to guard his face.

But the yellow head did not quite reach him. The snake was afraid. It drew back again, its movement doubtful, frightened.

The chill of strange fascination thawed from Price's body. Shouting the ax-song louder, he continued his deliberate advance.

The wedge-shaped head drew back. It sank upon xanthic coils, lay motionless. Purple-black eyes glittered at Price, alien, hostile—yet afraid.

Still he moved forward, fighting down, striving to conceal the naked terror of his revolting soul.

His legs came against the cold, smooth scales of its outermost coil. The flat head, yellow-hooded, was sunk down before him, strange eyes watching him with glittering intentness, evilly aflame with supernormal intelligence, terrible with wisdom older than men.

Shuddering, Price slapped the frightful head, as he had seen Malikar do, with his open hand. He was sick with fear, weak, trembling. Every fiber of his body shrank trembling from contact with the snake. But he was afraid *not* to strike it.

The thick body against his legs shook a little, but the great head, the sinister, glittering eyes, did not move.

With open hand he struck the cold, metal-scaled head a dozen times, so hard that his fingers stung, still shouting out the ax-song.

Then he turned away, forcing himself to move deliberately, not daring to look back. He walked to the end of the narrow bridge, and set foot upon the giddy way across the cavernous abyss of golden-green radiance, to the niche where he had found Aysa, sleeping.

29. Golden Blood

ODDLY, Price felt no vertigo, nor any fear of falling, as he started once more across that dizzy span, through thick, shimmering mist of gold. A single arch of black, gold-crusted rock, springing sheer across the yellow-green, infinite void, its unrailed path not two feet wide. In his concern for the sleeping girl, he was unconscious of any danger.

In the exigencies of his uncanny struggle with the serpent, he had even forgotten the soporific influence of the yellow vapor. He was midway across the abyss before it was recalled to him by sudden and overpowering lassitude, by a dullness of brain and a heaviness of eyes.

He held his breath to run the remaining hundred feet to the great niche, with its four slabs of gold-rimmed rock, for he dared not stop above the abyss. Safely upon the shelf, he fumbled for his handkerchief, wet it from the canteen old Sam Sorrows had so generously provided, and knotted it about his head, so that it covered his nose and mouth.

Aysa still lay upon the slab. Again he saw her lovely face, a-glitter with powder of gold. Still she was sunk in deepest sleep, breathing regularly, very slowly. Fearfully he brushed her cheeks and forehead, her small hands—and voiced a

shout of pure joy! Beneath yellow dust, her hands and face were softly pliant, naturally white. The dread change had not yet taken place. It must require months, perhaps even years.

He tried to wake the girl. Utterly limp, completely relaxed, she did not rouse when he shook her, nor respond to his calling of her name.

Then a rushing sibilance roared through the temple. The snake, coiled before the entrance to the Cyclopean hall, was hissing angrily again. And Vekyra was riding toward it, upon the golden tiger.

Hissing savagely, the gigantic yellow reptile threw itself toward the invaders. Vekyra flung herself nimbly from the *howdah* and ran to meet it, while the tiger crouched, snarling ferally.

The rich voice of the golden woman pealed out in strange, melodious syllables. Fearlessly she approached the hissing snake. It did not strike, but coiled again before her, lowering its lifted head.

She stood a while before it, her voice still ringing out, and at last it thrust its head toward her. She advanced again, caressed it, slipped her yellow arms around the great column of the neck. Her voice sank to a whisper.

Abruptly she turned, left the reptile coiled quietly. The tiger was still snarling uneasily; she silenced it with a shouted word. It sank back upon its haunches, watching the motionless snake.

Drawing from her tunic a flashing golden blade, narrow and keen as a stiletto, she ran past the snake and started swiftly across the narrow bridge. Then Price knew that she had come to murder Aysa, the sleeping girl who had innocently won her jealous hatred.

Snatching up the golden ax, Price hastened out upon the bridge to meet her. He knew that her passion for him had turned to hatred. He would have to fight for his own life, as well as Aysa's.

The gloating triumph upon Vekyra's painted yellow face gave way to stunned surprize. And surprize became sinister elation.

They met a hundred feet out upon the gold-frosted bridge. Vekyra stopped a dozen feet in front of him, greeted him with a mocking smile, her tawny-green, oblique eyes flashing maliciously.

"Peace upon you, Iru," she greeted him, her silky voice taunting. "Peace—if you wish it!"

"And on you, peace," Price replied solemnly, "if you will depart."

"*Lah!* But Iru, have you yet changed your mind?" She spoke mockingly. "You know that I talked with Jacob Garth last night. I promised him all that I promised you. He accepted; together we entered the mountain. He is even now fighting Malikar, in the halls above. I broke past, and came here to cut this wretched slave-girl into pieces and throw her into the abyss, where she can make no more trouble."

Price cursed her, sputtering with anger.

She smiled at him, enigmatically. "Yet, Iru, have you changed your mind? Will you forget the slave, and accept the crown of Anz?"

"Nothing doing!" snapped Price. "Get out—or fight!"

Vekyra laughed. With her rapier-like golden blade she pointed at the shining chasm below. Involuntarily, Price looked down into the illimitable gulf of golden-green; his head swam with the sheer vastness of the pit beneath the giddy bridge.

"Then you and your precious slave-girl shall be for ever together," she taunted, "—*there!*"

Lightly she darted forward, yellow blade hissing.

Price met her point with the golden

buckler, and swung the ancient ax. Vekyra leapt backward easily; and the force of his swing with the heavy ax almost toppled Price from the bridge.

As he struggled desperately to regain his balance, the yellow woman leapt forward again, her sword flashing at his throat. Price had to give ground to save himself, and one foot went half off the bridge.

Vekyra laughed at the sudden despair he could not keep from his face.

"Remember, Iru, the golden folk can not die!" she mocked. "And you are a mortal—though you may be born again for me to slay!"

Once more she slipped in, thrust, and repeated, with baffling swiftness. The ancient mail turned her stroke. But it was becoming evident to Price that he had met a very formidable opponent.

His shirt of mail and oval buckler gave him an advantage that was apparent only, for their weight slowed him, made it more difficult to keep his balance. And he could not swing the great ax effectively, lest the force of his own blow carry him off the bridge.

Vekyra, seemingly gifted with a perfect sense of balance, danced back and forth upon the gold-rimmed rock, thrusting, lightning-swift, with her narrow blade, easily avoiding his own awkward blows.

Again and again Price was forced to step perilously backward along the narrow way. He half regretted the impulse that had carried him out upon the dizzy arch; yet he dared not have Vekyra with him upon the ledge beyond, lest she slip past him and stab the sleeping girl.

He determined to try to reach the end of the bridge, where he would have ample footing, and might still keep Vekyra upon the narrow path.

FENDING off a score of lightning strokes, as he precariously retreated, he found himself at last upon the edge of the shelf.

A golden witch, Vekyra still danced upon the bridge. And here he could swing the massive ax without fear of its weight carrying him off into the awesome, yellow-green chasm.

Vekyra thrust once more, her yellow blade reaching for his throat. Tightening his grip upon the ax-helve, Price swung furiously.

The ax bit into her shoulder. Her sword-arm went limp. The blade fell from it, clattered on the lip of the abyss, and fell silently into the green-gold flame.

With a choking cry of rage and hatred, Vekyra leapt backward on the narrow path, pressing a pale hand to her wound. It was not deep, but blood sprang from it, fell in little glistening gouts upon the bridge. Golden blood. It was yellow and it gleamed like molten metal.

She stood a few moments there on the bridge, glaring at Price with baleful flames in her oblique, tawny eyes. Then, springing with the silent ferocity of a tigress, she leapt forward to attack him with naked golden hands.

Price stood grimly guarding the end of the bridge, with Iru's ax uplifted. He tried to strike at Vekyra, as she lunged at him, and he found that he could not. Some deep, blind force in him rebelled at hewing down an unarmed woman—even such a woman as Vekyra.

Dropping the ax behind him, he drove his fist at the golden witch. With incredible agility she avoided the blow, and flung herself upon him. She had recovered the use of the arm momentarily paralyzed by the wound.

Price instantly regretted the blind, instinctive chivalry that had made him discard the ax. She was no woman, this

golden witch! Like a tigress she hurled herself upon him, clawing at him with yellow talons, slashing at him with her teeth.

Beneath her rush he stumbled, and they fell together on the gold frost at the lip of the abyss.

For a few moments they rolled and twisted in furious struggling on the floor. The golden woman was supernormally strong; she fought with savage, demoniac energy. Then they staggered back to their feet, still locked in a straining embrace.

Price knew a little of wrestling, but not enough to cope with her maniacal strength. He was wet with sweat; his panting breath hissed through the rag tied over his face, and he felt that the thing was smothering him. His body ached with intolerable weariness.

Vekyra was panting, too, her swift breath puffing upon him. Her hot body was slippery with her own golden blood. But again and yet again she eluded his holds, while her own yellow arms held him in an unbreakable grasp.

Slowly, inexorably, she forced him toward the brink of the abyss. Then he tripped her, and they fell again. The sharp lip of the pit bit into his shoulder. His head was over the edge. He had a momentary glimpse of shining, golden-green depths.

Instinctively his grasp upon the golden body tightened. If he went into the abyss, it would not be alone.

The yellow woman screamed, struggled desperately to free herself. Together, they toppled slowly over the chasm's lip. Vekyra released him, made a last, frantic effort to save herself.

Certain she could reach no support, Price freed his own hands and snatched desperately at the edge of the precipice. His fingers closed upon the sharp edge of the rock, and an instant later his weight came upon them, straining weary muscles until they cracked.

The golden woman fell free of him. A single shriek of agonized terror floated upward, as she was swallowed in the golden-green vapor of the pit.

Mutely thankful that he, and not Vekyra, had been next the lip of rock, and hence able to grasp it in that last frantic instant, Price hung precariously by his arms. Slowly, with infinite effort, he inched his way up, flung his body over the edge of the black rock, and drew himself shakily to safety.

As he stood up, panting and trembling, he heard the crashing of guns and the clatter and roar of the tank. Peering through the golden mist above the abyss, he saw a little group of blue-robed snake-men, making a stubbornly fought retreat into the great hall, before blazing rifles.

30. Gold and Iron

WITH a sick heart, Price watched the battle across the abyss. The result of it meant little to him. If the snake-men won, he and Aysa would be again at the mercy of Malikar. If the invaders should be the victors, they would share no better at the hands of Joao de Castro and the others.

No more than a dwindling handful, the blue priests stood just at the entrance, savagely contesting the advance with pike and spear. Then the gray bulk of the tank roared through them, its guns beating their march of death.

The snake-men—the few that survived—scattered wildly across the broad, gold-frosted floor. But the invaders were not yet victorious. The giant snake, hissing again, flung forward from where Vekyra had left it.

The tank stopped abruptly, and the little group of white men behind it. Price

saw the yellow reptile's head swaying back and forth, knew that the men must be experiencing the deadly fascination of its terrible eyes.

Tearing his gaze away from the battle, Price turned to Aysa, tried again to wake her. His improvised gas mask was evidently protecting him from the somniferous influence of the golden vapor. Perhaps the girl would recover, if he fixed one for her. They might at least have a few minutes together, before the finish.

He removed her *kufiyeh,* shook the yellow, metallic powder from it, drenched it with water and spread it over her quiet face. He was wetting his own handkerchief again when a startling chorus of furious growls and hisses drew his attention back across the pit.

The golden tiger had attacked the snake. The two monstrous beings thrashed about the xanthic-frosted floor in colossal combat. The tiger, bulky as an elephant, and stronger, still carrying the black *howdah,* was slashing ferociously at the reptile with claw and fang.

It found the snake no mean opponent. As Price watched, the serpent whipped a gleaming yellow coil about the tiger's thick body, then another, and a third, constricting with crushing force. Still hissing, it struck with yellow fangs, again and again.

A Titan conflict of semi-metal giants, each preternaturally strong and powerful, each centuries old. The puny men beyond, dwarfed by this spectacle, stopped for a time to stare at the battle royal.

Then the tank came to lumbering life again. It clattered out upon the vast floor. Stuttering machine-guns moved back and forth, and the last of the snake-men, staring dazedly at this gigantic battle of their gods, fell upon xanthic frost.

Beast and reptile seemed evenly matched; Price's former allies, for the moment, were masters of the situation. He saw them gathered about the tank—but pigmies in this colossal place. Thick, gross Jacob Garth. Joao de Castro, small, alert, active. Huge, ape-like Pašić, the Montenegrin. A dozen others.

Sam Sorrows, Price's staunch friend, who might have aided him again, was not with them. Sam, he recalled, had returned to the oasis with orders for the planes. Müller was now driver of the tank.

Garth and Joao de Castro appeared to be arguing with Müller, who was looking through the manhole. The man shrugged, and retired into the machine. The motor roared again, and the tank lumbered on through the thick yellow mist.

The Cyclopean battle was still at issue. The coils of the snake were constricting ever tighter about the tiger's body. The reptile had ceased to hiss; but golden fangs still flashed.

The tiger, far from conquered, was tumbling upon the gold-powdered floor, tearing desperately at the serpent's coils with yellow, savage claws. The glistening, metal-scaled body of the snake was ripped in many places, oozing bright, golden blood.

THE tiger, evidently alarmed as the tank roared at them, staggered to its feet, lifting the squeezing snake clear of the floor. But the tank struck before it could leap aside. The force of the collision sent it reeling and staggering toward the abyss. It fell again, the inexorable coils of the serpent constricting ever tighter.

Perilously near the brink of the abyss the tiger had fallen. And seemingly it realized the danger, for, abandoning its attempts to rid itself of the snake, it struggled laboriously to its feet again,

already half dead from the pressure of golden coils.

The tank's motor had stalled. For a little time the gray fighting-machine was motionless; then it roared into life again. The snake-burdened tiger was just heaving to its feet when the tank struck it. The impact sent it staggering once more toward the chasm's lip. The tank paused, roared after it.

It may be that the driver momentarily lost control of the tank, or perhaps he had not seen the abyss. At any rate, tank, tiger and snake went over the brink as one mass. Price watched them, falling free into the green-gold void, turning slowly about, the tiger still squeezed in an embrace of death. Yellow vapor hid them. . . .

The roar of the madly racing motor died away below, and Price looked back across the abyss.

His former allies were victorious, masters at last of the treasure for which they had struggled so long. He faintly heard their feverish, excited voices, saw them falling upon their knees, scraping up the thick encrustation of golden crystals from the floor with bare hands.

He watched Joao de Castro and Pašić toil madly to fill a little cloth sack, in which they had carried food, with the yellow dust. When it was full, both laid hands upon it. Pašić snatched it easily away; the Eurasian flung himself upon him, knife flashing. They struggled, and the gold spilled unnoticed on the yellow floor. Deliberately Jacob Garth drew out his automatic and shot them down in cold brutality.

Insane with the gold-lust, the others paid no heed. They remained scraping at the xanthic dust, until the sinister sleep of the golden vapor fell upon them. Jacob Garth took alarm at last, staggered toward the entrance with a hoarse cry of warning. But too late. . . .

No, the men had not won mastery of the gold—it had conquered them. They lay sprawled where they had fallen, motionless in the sleep that would endure until they were men of gold.

When Price realized all this meant, his heart skipped a beat with incredulous relief. The way was cleared, now, for him to carry Aysa out. When she was safe, he could return and give these men what aid he could. But the hope of his glorious moment was rudely shattered.

Malikar came striding into the enormous room, grim, diabolical giant in his crimson robes, a spiked golden mace upon his shoulder. With a caution worthy of his antiquity, he had kept clear of his enemies until they were helplessly sleeping.

One by one, he visited the inert men. Ruthlessly, methodically, he changed their slumber into one that would not end. He stood among them, then, for a little time, leaning upon the great mace—it was now no longer yellow, but encrimsoned with blood and brains—a golden Nemesis, red-robed.

Then, shouldering the reddened mace, he started across the bridge.

31. Kismet

IT HAD been a tactical error to meet Vekyra upon the bridge, Price realized, because she had been quicker and more agile than himself. But, in Malikar's case, the same arguments did not apply. Vekyra had proved amazingly strong; Malikar's far bulkier body was doubtless far stronger. In a contest merely of strength, Price could be certain of defeat; he must make it a battle of skill. And skill, quickness, would count for far more upon the giddy span.

Black premonition of doom was in his heart. Three times before he had encountered Malikar; three times he had been bested.

He bent, brushed the golden frost from Aysa's lips with his own. A few moments before he had seen himself carrying the girl into sunlight and the open air, where she would surely wake. Now his brief cup of joy was shattered. Malikar, his other enemies gone, was more dangerous than ever.

A roar of startled rage told Price that Malikar had seen him through the mist. Brandishing the bloody mace, the yellow giant came at a run. Replacing the damp cloth over the girl's face, Price snatched up the ancient ax and ran out to meet the priest.

Upon recognizing him, Malikar stopped. Resting the great club carelessly upon the narrow path, he laughed with a bellow of triumphant evil.

"Iru, again?" he shouted. "Fool, know you not that I am a god who can never die?"

"No, I don't," retorted Price, still advancing.

"You can never conquer *kismet!*" The yellow priest chuckled thickly, with leering evil in his shallow, tawny eyes. "Three times we have met. And three times has fate struck you down.

"In the catacombs of Anz, *kismet* willed that your ax-helve should break. When we fought in the *wadi,* fate placed a loose stone beneath your foot. Again we met here, and *kismet* sent sleep upon you.

"You fight not *me* alone. *Kismet* is against you!"

Realizing that Malikar meant the boast merely as an attack upon his morale, Price ran forward to begin the battle, but the priest's mocking words had already served their purpose. They had filled him with the baseless but disturbing idea that all this adventure had been but a play of unseen forces, of sporting gods handling puppet strings, the idea that he was but a toy of cruelly jesting fate.

At his approach Malikar lifted the bloody mace, whirled it aloft and down. Oval buckler lifted, Price took the blow. It drove the shield down upon his head with stunning force, numbed his arms and shoulder.

An instant he reeled. The green-golden depths beneath the narrow bridge whirled confusingly. He made a desperate effort to clear his brain.

Korlu, the ancient ax, was lifted. And Malikar had not yet recovered the mace from his terrific blow. Price put every atom of his strength into a swing for the priest's red skull-cap.

Malikar ducked, but the hewing blade caught his shoulder.

The blow went true; it would have split an ordinary man to the abdomen. But Malikar was semi-metal. His skin was gashed, and bright yellow blood oozed out, but the wound was insignificant.

The violence of his own blow sent Price half off the bridge. He staggered awkwardly to regain his balance, as Malikar swung up the spiked club for another blow.

Price regained his balance, stepped backward and let the mace go past. As the force of his swing swayed Malikar toward the edge of the bridge, Price struck swiftly with the ax, in the hope of upsetting his balance. Malikar recovered easily, and evaded the ax.

Price struggled against grim despair. Human muscle and bone could not endure many such terrific blows as he had received; and the ax, swung true with his full strength behind it, had not seriously wounded the golden man. In any mere exchange of blows, Price knew, he was doomed. He had but a single chance of

victory—to catch Malikar in a critical position, knock him off the bridge into the yawning abyss. And the priest appeared to possess caution and a cat-like sense of equilibrium.

Perforce, Price changed his tactics. No more did he come to close quarters. He kept his distance, tempting Malikar to strike, avoiding—when he could—the smashing mace, waiting for the moment when a quick blow might send the priest into the abyss.

The yellow giant pressed forward continually, so that Price was forced to give ground before each blow, retreating at grave risk of missing his footing on the dizzy way. Moreover, each step back brought Price nearer the niche where Aysa lay, lessening his chance of victory. For, once Malikar gained the platform, the battle would be lost.

Twice again the ax went home. It was splashed with golden blood; but Malikar seemed not inconvenienced by his wounds.

Price was reeling. Again and again the mace had fallen upon his buckler, despite his efforts to avoid it. His left arm and shoulder ached from the terrific shocks. His head rang from concussion, oppressed with red mists of pain.

Exhaustion was near. The accumulated fatigue of many hours descended upon him. His present exertions were anything but light—lunging forward to draw the bloody mace, darting back to avoid it, swinging the yellow ax when opportunity presented.

PRICE dared not look back to see how much of the bridge remained behind him. But presently he glimpsed beneath his feet the glittering gouts of golden blood Vekyra had shed. Then he knew it was only a few feet to the platform, where he would be at Malikar's mercy.

Desperately he stood his ground, as the mace rose and fell again. It drove the lifted buckler down upon his head with staggering force. The ancient ax went out again, at Malikar's thick neck, all Price's strength behind it.

Fatigue and the faintness of concussion slowed his arm. Malikar swayed back. The yellow blade flashed futilely in front of his throat.

Half dazed as he was, Price staggered toward the edge of the bridge, drawn by the weight of his ax. He swayed for a moment over the side of the narrow span, while the green-golden void beneath spun crazily.

Before he could recover his balance, Malikar struck again with the spiked golden club. Though his blow was hasty and relatively weak, its impact was staggering.

It struck Price's right shoulder. Painful numbness ran along his arm. His fingers, paralyzed, relaxed their grip upon the helve of the outflung ax. The golden weapon spun away from him, whirled silently into yellow-green mist.

Price's dazed mind reeled under the impact of the disaster as if from a second blow. Once more fate had stepped in, to defeat him.

"*Kismet!*" shouted Malikar, leering triumphantly.

He lumbered forward, his spiked mace lifted. Helpless, Price tottered uncertainly back, fighting to keep his head clear enough to stand upon the narrow way.

The bright pool of Vekyra's blood was just before Malikar, gleaming like a gout of molten gold. As he sprang forward, *kismet* once more entered the battle.

He stepped into the golden woman's blood. As if Vekyra's own malicious hand had seized his ankle, his foot slipped. He lurched forward awkwardly, shifting his heavy mace aside to maintain his balance.

Thus was provided the opening Price had been hopelessly fighting for. His whole body numb with fatigue and pain, he braced himself, swung his fist at the golden priest's head.

Into that blow went the last, convulsive effort of his tortured body. As he felt his fist meet solid flesh and bone, bright, glittering lights flashed up through the green-gold void, and darkness drowned them.

He fell flat upon the narrow bridge, flinging out his hands to clutch the xanthic-frosted rock.

32. *The Ancient Aysa*

"*M'ALMÉ! M'almé!*" The sweet, familiar voice came to Price's ears upon silver wings, through dull clouds of pain. Delicate hands were plastering a cold wet cloth upon his brow. Memory was gone; his mind, like his body, was bruised, stiff, inert.

"Master! Master!" the urgent voice kept pleading, in Arabic.

With a vague, dim impression that grave emergency, disaster, had been looming over him, Price forced open his eyes.

He lay upon a broad, smooth ledge of stone, frosted queerly with bright yellow crystals. He was propped against a huge slab of basalt. Before him was a bottomless pit of green-golden light, spanned with a bridge fantastically narrow. The world was thickly filled with dancing aureate mist—that mist, he remembered faintly, was somehow threatening.

Kneeling beside him was a girl. He turned his head painfully and looked at her. A lovely girl. Her hair was brown and waving, her skin a smooth, warm olive. Full, delicate, her mouth was pomegranate-red.

Wonderful, her eyes were. Somehow, they made him feel that he knew them. They were violet-blue, deep, mysterious, beneath long lashes. Keen pity was now in their shadowed depths, and distress.

Like the rocks about them, the girl's clothing glittered with xanthic frost. Smudges of yellow powder sparkled on her face and arms.

And she had been urgently calling to him in Arabic, addressing him as "master." Surely he could have no claim upon a being so lovely! But if he did, the circumstance was singularly fortunate.

He closed his eyes, racking his memory. This weird place of golden vapors, outrageously fantastic as it might be, was vaguely familiar. And he was certain he had known the girl before, somewhere. Sight of her filled him with a warming glow of pleasure.

He knew her name. It was—he probed dull mists of weary pain—it was Aysa!

Aysa! His lips had muttered it aloud. At the sound, the girl uttered a glad cry. She dropped beside him; her arms went round him. Queer how pleasant her embrace was! A delightful girl. He liked to have her near him; he mustn't let her leave him, ever again. The nearness of her filled him with quick, tingling joy.

It was good to lie here with her arms around him. But he mustn't do that. There was some danger. . . . The yellow mist. . . . He struggled with the idea: golden mist . . . that was it; the mist turned people to gold. It would turn him and Aysa into golden things. And he didn't want that to happen.

He fumbled for the wet cloth the girl had been applying to his forehead, made her tie it over her face. She understood quickly, fixed another for him. His arms ached when he moved . . . he must have been fighting, to feel so bruised and groggy. . . . Yes, he remembered hitting a yellow man.

He inhaled through the damp rag and closed his eyes and pondered the memory of the yellow man . . . a golden giant of a man, in scarlet. . . . He must remember his name . . . Malikar! He would ask the girl about him; she spoke Arabic.

"Where is Malikar?" he whispered.

She pointed into the shining chasm.

"I woke, *m'almé,* with a wet cloth upon my face, and saw you fighting. Malikar struck you with his club. Then you hit him with your hand, and he stumbled off into the pit. You fell upon the bridge, and I carried you back here."

His head was clearing now, since he was breathing through the cloth.

"But how did you come here so soon, *m'almé,* from Anz? It was just last night that Malikar locked you in the tomb of Iru, and told me you were dead."

Strange wonder was in the violet eyes.

Understanding swept through his brain, drove back the dull mists of oblivion. Everything was clear, now. And Aysa was with him, awake and free. Darling Aysa, for whom he had fought so long. It was not last night he had been locked in the catacombs of Anz, but many nights ago. But no need to tell her now.

He slipped one aching arm around her shoulders. She snuggled up contentedly against him, lifted violet eyes, shining with gladness. . . .

They must not stay here. The sleep of the golden vapor might steal upon them, unawares, with its strange transmutation. Aysa was not yet changed. But they must go, while they could. . . .

"You are tired, *M'almé,*" Aysa whispered. "Let us rest here."

The sun was low, and the black, basaltic mass of *Hajar Jehannum* was three miles behind them, across smooth lava flows, the gold and alabaster of the palace of Veel glowing luridly in red sunset. Two hours ago they had come through the explosion-twisted yellow gates, where Jacob Garth had entered, and begun the long trek to the oasis.

"You must not call me master," Price told her, as they sat munching the hardtack and dried meat and dates old Sam Sorrows had given him.

"Why not? Am I not yours? And did you not once buy me for half my weight in gold?" She laughed. "And do I want anything save to be yours?"

"What do you mean, darling? Buying you?"

"You don't remember? The story of Aysa and Iru in old Anz? But you never heard it! I must tell you."

"Then there *was* a woman named Aysa in Anz, when Iru was king?"

"Of course, *m'almé.* I am named for her, because my eyes are blue, as hers were. Few, you know, among the Beni Anz, have blue eyes. The ancient Aysa was a slave; Iru bought her from the north country."

Price felt oddly disturbed. Was Vekyra's strange tale, after all, true? Was Aysa—his lovely, innocent Aysa—the namesake, if not the avatar, of a murderess?

"Well, don't worry about it, sweetheart!" Price told her. He put a bruised, stiff arm about her slender shoulders and drew her firmly to him. She laughed, a little, childish, happy laugh, and her violet eyes looked shining up at him.

He wasn't going to let anything take her away from him, ever. No part of her. He was going to forget that silly story of Vekyra's. He didn't believe in this reincarnation business, anyhow . . . not too much. . . .

"I'll tell you the story, *m'almé,*" Aysa whispered, in his arms.

"No, let's forget it. Nothing to it,

anyhow. And happy as we are, we can't let anything——"

"But, *m'almé*, this story can not ruin our happiness."

"Then tell me, of course."

"Since he was a child, Iru the king was betrothed, by the wishes of his mother, to Vekyra, who was the daughter of a powerful prince—and not golden, then.

"Iru, by the legend, loved the slave-girl, Aysa. And Vekyra was jealous. One night she made the king drunk, and won the slave from him in a game of chance."

"I understand how she might have done that," said Price, recalling his own adventure in the castle of Verl.

"When Iru was sober, he demanded that Vekyra trade him back the slave. She dared not deny him. But she set the greatest price she could think of. She told Iru she would exchange him the girl for a tiger tame enough to ride.

"So Iru rode into the mountains, and caught a live tiger cub, and tamed it. When it was grown, he gave it to Vekyra, and she had to surrender the slave—but still she hated Aysa."

Price's disquiet was returning. This was the same story Vekyra had told, of the pampered and adored slave—who was to murder her adorer. He resisted an impulse to stop the girl. After all, what happened twenty centuries ago could not come between them now.

"Iru did not like the cruel worship of the snake. He destroyed the snake's temple, slew its priests in battle. But Malikar, when all thought him dead, came back, a man of gold, to avenge the desecration of the temple. In vain he made war on Iru, and at last he disguised himself and slipped into Anz, to slay Iru by stealth.

"He found a woman to do murder for him."

Price's heart sank. This was the same evil tale.

"I know not what he told Vekyra. He must have offered her the immortal golden life he afterward gave her, and the power with him over Anz. And Vekyra must have hated Iru, because of the slave.

"So Vekyra poisoned Iru's wine——"

A pæan of joy rose in Price's heart. He drew Aysa abruptly to him, smothered her words with kisses.

"Why are you so glad," she inquired innocently, "that Vekyra poisoned the wine?"

"Never mind, darling. Go on with the story."

"Vekyra herself handed Iru the bowl. The slave-girl was near. She saw the look on Vekyra's face, and cried out, and told Iru not to drink.

"Then Vekyra, to save herself, pretended to be very angry. She cursed the slave-girl. She said she herself would drink the wine, if Iru would give back the girl to her.

"But Iru refused. He was too brave to understand how another could do a cowardly thing. In the haste of his anger, he put the bowl to his own lips. Aysa tried to strike it from his hand; he held her back.

"Aysa then implored the king to let her drink it, rather than he. But he drained the bowl himself. Instantly he fell. His last breath was a promise that he would return to destroy Vekyra.

"The slave-girl threw herself down upon his body. Vekyra pinned the two together with a dagger she had ready in her clothing, to use if the poison failed. Leaving them so, she escaped from the palace to Malikar, who gave her reward for the thing."

Price did not speak.

The story had removed his last unwilling doubt, the final barrier between them.

Now they were one. It seemed to Price as if a vast purpose had come to pass. A unity, an ultimate completeness, emerged from the confused, painful conflict of his life. He knew that every incident in his years of discontented roving had been but a step toward this moment with Aysa in the desert.

The sun descended, reddened. A purple sea, the vast shadow of *Hajar Jehannum* flowed over the rugged basalt plain behind them. Cooler air breathed against their blistered faces; the savage violence of the day surrendered to the mystic peace of twilight.

Aysa moved a little, sighing happily, and relaxed against him. His arm pillowed her fair head. The still desert wrapped them with a peace deeper than Price had ever known, with a quiet happiness that became changeless and enduring as the very desert.

THAT new peace was not broken when Aysa tensed abruptly in his arms, listening, and asked:

"What is that, humming like a great bee?"

Price heard the distant droning. He pointed out the gray mote wheeling up against the deepening azure of the southward sky. He knew that it was one of the fighting-planes that had been called by Jacob Garth's radio.

It came northward, following the trail. Price and Aysa stood up as it came near; Price took off his shirt and waved it. The gray ship found them, roared low over them. Price saw Sam Sorrows, the old Kansan, bareheaded, leaning recklessly from the cockpit, gesturing with his arms. He waved in return, and the plane flew back toward the oasis.

"That is a flying-ship of my own people," he told Aysa. "We may ride in it back to my land, if you wish. The man who waved is my friend. The rocks are so rough that he could not come down here. But he will come for us tomorrow."

Wide-eyed with wonder, she asked many questions as the droning of the plane died in purple twilight. Price answered them, while the ancient stillness of the rock desert came back and the broad gold disk of the moon broke above a rugged horizon.

Aysa was eager, excited. But Price's new, joyous peace lived on in a world of silver light and purple shadow, at one with silence and mystery that had endured a million years. She sat by him in the moonlight, and he was content.

[THE END]

The Watcher in the Green Room

By HUGH B. CAVE

A gripping story of the weird doom that befell a man who had murdered his wife

"It was getting ready to attack him."

THE plump, stumpy man in the double-breasted gray coat was quite obviously drunk. He walked with an exaggerated shuffle which carried him perilously close to the edge of the high curbing, whereupon he stopped short, drew his fat hands from their respective pockets, and gravely regarded the drooling gutter beneath him. Proceeding sluggishly in this manner, he successfully navigated three blocks of gleaming sidewalk, turned left into Peterboro Street, and arrived before a red-brick apartment building whose square front frowned down upon him with disapproving solemnity.

He stood staring, apparently unaware that the hour was midnight and that the rain which had fallen steadily since early evening had made of him a drenched, dishevelled street-walker. Before him, as he stood thus contemplating the wide en-

trance, the door opened and a man and a woman descended the stone steps. They gazed at him queerly. The man spoke.

"Drunk again, Kolitt?"

"Still," the drunken one replied, grinning.

"You'd better let Frank help you," the woman advised. "You'll be invading the wrong apartment again."

The plump man raised one hand up and out in a clumsy salute.

"A camel," he said, "never forgets."

The man and woman hesitated. In an undertone the man muttered:

"Poor devil! It's too bad. I suppose it's the easiest way to forget."

The drunken one did not hear. He grinned idiotically as the man and woman went their way, leaving him to ascend the steps alone. In the lobby he groped in the pockets of his coat and produced a key-ring. Mechanically he thrust two fingers into the brass mail-box marked ANTHONY KOLITT. Then, opening the heavy inner door with a key proportionately large, he marched down the corridor, climbed two flights of rubber-carpeted stairs, and let himself into apartment number thirty-one.

"Five days gone," he mumbled, closing the door behind him. "If they haven't found out by now, they never will."

The thought sobered him, but he was still drunk enough to fumble awkwardly for the light-switch. The bright light blinded him. Blinking, he groped down the short hall to the living-room and lowered himself heavily, coat and all, into an overstuffed chair close to the radio. Reaching out, he lit the lamp on the end-table beside him; then he stretched himself, relaxed, and gazed intently at a large gray photograph which stared at him serenely from atop the radio.

The photograph was of a woman—attractive, straight-haired, somber-eyed, perhaps thirty years of age. It stood formally in a square silver frame, bare of ornamentation or inscription. The plump man studied it without emotion, as if he had studied it precisely the same way a great many times before. Presently he rose, removed his wet garments and shoes, and walked near-naked into the adjoining room. When he returned, he held a bottle and glass in his hands. He filled the glass, raised it toward the photograph, and said quietly:

"Pleasant dreams."

Then he turned out the light and paced unsteadily into the bedroom.

The bedroom was small and square, boasting a wooden three-quarter bed, a squat table, a massive old-fashioned bureau, and a single yellow-curtained window. The plump man sat on the bed and removed his socks. He stared at the bureau, grinned cruelly, and said:

"Too big, eh? Old style, is it? Well, it's a good thing it *was* big; otherwise you'd be kind of cramped for room, sweetheart. For once you won't complain, eh?"

The bed was unmade. He climbed into it and shaped the pillow with his fists, then lay on his back and gazed at the ceiling. The room was not quite dark. Its single window was high above the street outside and level with the roof of a building across the way. The wet windowpane exuded a green glow, reflecting the pale glare of a neon sign on the near-by roof. The glow was pleasant; the plump man enjoyed looking at it. It made fantastic, green-edged shapes on the walls of the room and transformed the huge bureau in the corner into a monstrous four-legged beast. He liked the beast. It was something to talk to.

"So you got her at last, eh?" he said drunkenly. "Ate her right up and swallowed her." His laugh was a low gurgle. "Serves her right, that does, for getting

silly notions. She'd have found fault with anything, *she* would! I'm glad you got her—glad your insides were big enough to hold her. Yes, sir, that's poetic justice."

The bureau was half in shadow. Even the visible portions of it were shadowed, ill-defined, so that no separate details were distinct. It was more massive than usual tonight, because the green light was dimmed by the drizzling rain. Last night, when there had been no rain, the hulk had been a huge, staring hound. The night before that it had been a fantastic horse with many malformed heads. Well, there was nothing strange about that. Almost any object of furniture could assume changing shapes in semidarkness. The extent of the shapes depended entirely on the strength of the observer's imagination.

The plump man chuckled to himself. *He* had a good enough imagination. It had come in handy, too, not so very long ago. And right now it was a blessing. It kept him from thinking too much about certain unpleasant things which had occurred recently.

He studied the bureau lazily. It had assumed a different shape tonight, probably because of the rain. It had eyes, several of them—they were the protruding knobs on the drawers. It had thick, misshapen legs, too, and a bloated torso. What would Bellini, the goggle-eyed chap downstairs, say to that? Most likely he'd look with wide eyes, and shudder, and whisper warnings in his thin, womanish voice. Bellini was like a lot of other superstitious fools; he made too much out of nothing. Sentimental idiot! If he *knew* what that bureau contained, he'd run screaming back to his stuffy apartment at the back of the building, and hide himself there!

"Well, he won't know," the plump man said indifferently. "That's our secret, eh, old boy? When we move out of here in a few days more, we'll take it with us. *Then* let 'em learn the truth, if they can!"

Still drunk, he saluted the bulging shape in the corner. Then he dragged the bedclothes around him and hunched his knees into his stomach, and went to sleep.

PALE sunlight was streaking the walls of the room when he woke. He lay motionless many minutes, aware that his mouth was dry and swollen and his head aching. Some day, he reflected wearily, somebody would discover a way to take the hangover out of hard liquor.

He put both hands to his forehead and pressed hard, then rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms. What time was it? About ten o'clock, probably; it was hard to tell, because the sunlight in the room was so feeble.

Stiffly he climbed out of bed and groped for a pair of slippers, then scuffed noisily into the kitchenette and opened the ice-box door. While he was thumbing the cork out of a gin bottle, the door at the end of the hall rattled. Scowling, he paced back along the corridor and fumbled with the knob.

"Who is it?"

"Me. Welks," said the man outside.

The plump man opened the door slowly and stood there with the gin bottle dangling in his fist. The other man—the same who had offered to assist him last night—said hesitantly:

"Thought I'd see if everything was all right, Kolitt. You were in pretty bad shape last night."

"I was drunk, eh?"

"You weren't exactly sober."

The plump one scowled, then stepped aside, grinning.

"Come in. Have a drink," he said. " 'Scuse the attire. I just got up."

He closed the door and led his visitor

down the hall, then motioned the man to a chair and went into the kitchen for two glasses. Returning, he said:

"I guess your wife was shocked, eh?"

"Not at all." The other man accepted the full glass and turned it idly in his fingers. He seemed unsure of himself. "She knows what you're going through. We all do. Can't blame a chap for hitting the bottle under such circumstances." He hesitated, stared at the plump man's bleary eyes. "But aren't you overdoing it, Kolitt? What'll your wife say when she does come back?"

"She won't come back."

"Why so sure?"

"I'm no fool." He upended the glass in his mouth and swallowed noisily. "When a man's wife walks out on him, Welks, there's a reason. She doesn't just go for a hike."

"You mean there's another man?"

"If there is, good luck to him."

"You're taking it hard, old boy."

"I'm no fool," Anthony Kolitt repeated. "When a man comes home and finds his wife's clothes and her bags gone, and the house empty, and a good-bye note on the bureau . . . You asked me yesterday why I didn't notify the police and have them find her. That's why."

The man named Welks put down his glass and stood erect.

"Sorry, old man," he said. "I didn't know."

He paced into the hall, stopped, turned again.

"Anything I can do——" he mumbled.

He closed the hall door after him.

Anthony Kolitt poured himself another drink. A little while later he put on a lavender dressing-gown and paced to the door. Stooping, he picked up the morning paper, then returned to the living-room, sat n the overstuffed chair, placed the gin bottle, a glass, and a pack of cigarettes within reach on the smoke-stand, and leisurely began to read the sporting pages.

HE WAS quite drunk again when Mr. Cesare Bellini, from downstairs, called upon him two hours later; so drunk, in fact, that he shook Bellini's hand warmly and said with a large grin:

"Well, well! Come right in!"

Mr. Bellini was not usually welcome. He was a tall, painfully slender young man with ascetic features and untrimmed raven hair. He was a student—though what particular kind of student he was, Anthony Kolitt had never troubled to find out. Mr. Bellini was one of those "queer, artistic" chaps. It was believed that he gave readings, or something of the sort, to people who came professionally to see him.

"I have come to see if there is anything, no matter how insignificant, I can do for you," he said jerkily.

He sat stiffly in a straight-backed chair, leaning forward toward Anthony Kolitt with his lean hands flat upon his knees. His trousers needed pressing, Mr. Kolitt observed. He also needed instructions on how to knot a necktie. The one acceptable thing about him was the pale blue silk handkerchief protruding from his breast pocket; it gave him an almost feminine air of daintiness.

"What do you mean?" Mr. Kolitt shrugged. "You think you can find *her* for me?"

"If I could," Bellini murmured, "I would."

"Well, why can't you? You're a spiritualist or something, aren't you?"

"A spiritualist? No, no. I am not that, Mr. Kolitt."

"Well, what about the people who come to see you? They come to get read-

ings, and that sort of business, don't they?"

"No. You are mistaken. They come for advice. They come with troubles in their hearts. Me, I look in their minds and tell them what they should do."

"Oh. You're a psychologist, eh?" Mr. Kolitt grinned.

"Psychopathist, rather, Mr. Kolitt."

"Well," Mr. Kolitt said drunkenly, "go ahead. Do your stuff. I'm drunk; I ought to be easy."

"It is a strange thing, drink," Bellini murmured, moving his head sideways over its protruding Adam's apple. "Some men, they drink to celebrate. They are happy; they wish to be happier. Others drink like you, to forget a sadness. You are lonely, no?"

"Oh, I got a pal," Mr. Kolitt declared warmly.

"A pal? Here?"

"Right in the next room, young feller. Come along." He stood up, swaying in an attempt to balance himself. "I'll show you."

Bellini did not understand. He frowned, and the frown darkened his already dark eyes and bunched his brows together over his hooked nose. He suspected, apparently, that Mr. Kolitt's pal was an ephemeral being born of gin fumes. Silently he followed Mr. Kolitt into the bedroom.

"There," said Mr. Kolitt, pointing.

"But I see nothing."

"Not now you don't. Of course not. It's only there at night."

"At night?" Bellini frowned. "I am afraid I do not——"

"Then le' me explain, and you *will* understand."

Mr. Kolitt sat importantly on the unmade bed and hooked the heels of his slippers on the wooden bed-frame. Folding his arms around his upthrust knees, he grinned into his guest's face and hiccuped noisily. Then, without haste, he slyly proceeded to inform the thin young man of the nightly visitor which, created by a combination of green light, shadow, and applied imagination, emanated from the massive bureau in the corner. And, having finished this prolonged dissertation, he released his knees and sprawled back upon the bed, expecting to be amused no end by Bellini's outburst of horror.

The outburst was not forthcoming. Bellini peered at him thoughtfully a moment, as if wondering how much of the speech could justly be attributed to a belly full of liquor. He then turned and studied the window, the bureau, and the respective arrangement of each to the other. Finally he said, frowning:

"That is a most dangerous game, my friend."

Mr. Kolitt was disappointed. Obviously so. He sat up, blinking. He said petulantly:

"Eh? Dangerous?"

"You are—how do you say it?—flirting with fire," Bellini declared.

"You mean I'll be scaring myself?"

"Perhaps. But it is not so simple. This thing which you are making out of nothing—this monster which is one night a large dog, and another night a many-headed horse, and another night a horrific portent unlike any named beast—it is, perhaps, only a thing of lights and shadows, as you have told me. But you are playing foolishly with profound metaphysics, my friend. With ontology. With the essence of all being. You are a blind man, walking treacherous ways of darkness."

"Eh?" Mr. Kolitt said again. "I'm what?"

"You are a fool," Bellini said simply. "You do not comprehend. The imagination, it is a powerful force. It is a pro-

ductive faculty, seeking everywhere for truth. If there is no truth, it creates truth. This thing you are creating for your amusement, it is unreal, perhaps. But if you are too persistent, you will make it real."

"Sure," Mr. Kolitt agreed pleasantly. "Then I could get it drunk, like me, eh? We'd be pals."

"Very well. It is good to joke, my friend. It is good to be unafraid. That is because you do not understand. Yesterday a woman came to me and said: 'I had a dream, and in my dream my son came to me and bent over me and spoke to me. How is that? He is dead. Can the dead return?' And I said to her: 'Yes, the dead do sometimes return. But the man who came to you was a real man. You created him by thinking of him. He spoke the words you, yourself, put into his mouth. If you had willed him to kiss you, he would have kissed you.' That is what I told her, and it is true. The same is true with you. When you create this strange portent in your mind, it is a reality. It is what you make it. It does what you will it."

"Suppose I willed it to get me a drink," Mr. Kolitt murmured gently.

"Very well. You are making a fool of me. I will go. But *you* are the fool, my friend. You are toying with the very essence of life. I hope you are not so drunk one night that you mistake life for death."

Apparently it was not difficult to anger Bellini's Latin temperament. His dark eyes burned. He turned deliberately and stared at the huge bureau.

"If I were you," he said bluntly, "I would move that where lights and shadows and your fertile imagination"—he spoke the word with significant emphasis—"would no longer transform it into something other than what it is. Good day, my friend."

Mr. Kolitt swayed forward, protesting.

"Now wait a minute. I didn't mean to poke fun at you. I——"

"Good day," Bellini repeated coldly. "I do not enjoy being made the idiot. To a man so drunk as you, all wisdom is a waste of time. I will come again, perhaps, when you are more sober."

The hall door clicked shut behind him.

Mr. Kolitt sat on the bed, blinked foolishly at the bureau a moment, and said gravely:

"Now see what you've done. You've scared the nice man away."

MR. KOLITT was neither drunk nor quite sober when he let himself into his apartment that night. He had spent most of the evening at the theater around the corner, and the offering there had been unpleasantly sinister. The silver screen, reflected Mr. Kolitt, was a peril sadly in need of censorship. It should be against the law to show certain pictures to certain people. Tonight's presentation had made him shudder.

He did not recall the name of the picture, but the majority of its scenes had been of a strikingly weird nature. One in particular was so vivid in his mind, even now, that it made him uneasy.

"Ugh!" he grunted. "I can see it yet, that damned thing!"

The thing which bothered him had been a monster; a manufactured monster, to be sure—created by experts out of immense sheets of rubberized cloth and animated by internal gears and levers—but horrible, nevertheless. He had visions of it advancing toward him, as it had advanced upon the unfortunate villain in the picture. Such things, he decided, should be outlawed.

The hour, now, was eleven o'clock. After leaving the theater, he had visited the Business Men's Club and vainly at-

tempted to drive away his morbidity by batting a small white ping-pong ball across a table in the game-room. Tiring of that, he had won seven dollars playing poker, and had spent the seven dollars on a quart of excellent rye whisky. He needed the whisky. It would steady his nerves. For the past several days his nerves had needed constant attention and lubrication.

He took the bottle from his pocket and placed it gently on the radio, beside his wife's photograph. Methodically he removed his tie, shirt, trousers, and shoes, and went to the bedroom for his dressing-gown. Then he turned on the radio and sat in the overstuffed chair, with a book in his lap.

He opened the book. It was a mystery story. He liked mystery stories. This one would take his mind off his own troubles and make him forget himself. He reached for the bottle and looked about for a glass. Finding none, he shrugged his hunched-up shoulders and upended the bottle in his mouth, drinking noisily. Then, grinning, he began to read.

Reading, he became aware presently that the dance music emanating from the radio had become something less pleasant. Voices rasped at him. He listened a moment, scowling, then leaned forward abruptly to turn the dial; but instead of turning it, he listened again. It was one of those things you just had to listen to. There was a sound of wind howling, and rain beating eerily against shut windows. There were voices whispering. The voices ceased. Into the strange silence came the ominous tread of slow footsteps: clump . . . clump . . . clump. . . .

Mr. Kolitt grunted and turned the radio off. He leaned back in his chair, trembling. For a while he stared with wide eyes at the photograph of his wife; then, with an obvious effort, he focused his attention on the book in his lap. Before he had read half a page more, he snapped the book shut and dropped it on the floor.

"Damnation!" he said. "Everywhere I turn there's murder and horror! There ought to be a law against such things! It's uncivilized!"

He stood up and drank deeply from the bottle. Snarling, he strode into the bedroom and switched on the light. His gaze wandered to the bureau in the corner. He said viciously:

"Blast him and his big talk! It's his fault! He's the one who started this business!"

He was thinking of Bellini. Bellini's smoldering eyes and deliberate words plagued him.

The single window was again wet with rain, and its drooling glass winked with many green eyes, derisively. The glass was pretty, Mr. Kolitt thought. It was like a large, moving tray in a jeweler's store. Each green-edged drop of water was a tiny precious emerald.

"And I suppose if I sat down and imagined 'em to be emeralds," he grunted, "they'd *be* emeralds. Yes they would not!"

He smiled crookedly then, as if relieved at thus finding a flaw in Bellini's reasoning. Quietly he removed the rest of his clothes and went to the bureau. Opening the top drawer, he took out clean pajamas; then he looked down at the lower drawers and tapped the bottom one with his naked foot.

"Comfortable?" he said quietly.

He unfolded the pajamas. They were green, with white stripes. Methodically he got into them and stood idly before the bureau, his elbows angling outward as he buttoned the green jacket-front. The room was warm. Frowning, he walked to the radiator and turned the small handle on the side of it. Then he stood at the window, looking out. Across the

way, the green neon sign was like giant handwriting in the drizzle.

"Tonight's the last night I'll be looking at you," he said. "We're moving out of here tomorrow—me and the hope chest here." He turned his head drunkenly to peer at the bureau. "Yep. It's safe enough for us to clear out now. The neighbors won't be suspicious. They'll think I'm just a poor lonely devil trying to forget."

He was aware suddenly that the odor of his own breath, tainted with liquor fumes, was not the only odor in the room. There was another smell, less pleasant and more significant—a sour emanation suggesting decay, as of spoiled meat. Eyes narrowed and lips puckered slightly, he strode quickly to the bureau and stooped to bring his nostrils close to the lower drawers. When he straightened again he stood staring, his hands pressing hard against his hips.

"We'll be leaving tomorrow, all right," he muttered. "It won't be too soon, at that. I'll have to burn incense in here before the moving-men come."

He went into the living-room, then, and took the bottle he had left there on the smoke-stand. Quietly he turned out the light, and the hall light, too, and paced back to the bedroom. He opened the window six inches at the bottom, to let out that offensive odor. Then he went to bed.

He did not sleep. The room was too warm, and that unpleasant smell of pollution was too much in evidence. He lay with his thoughts, and they were morbid thoughts, parading rapidly across the bed. First marched the memories of that night not so long ago, when he had knelt on the floor of this very room, with a keen-edged kitchen-knife in one hand and a hack-saw . . . but it was better to forget those things. Then came the neighbors, finding him drunk, asking him questions, offering their sympathies. "Oh, but she'll come back, Mr. Kolitt! Women are strange creatures. They do strange things, but they are just women after all. She'll come back." And again: "Don't worry, old boy. She hasn't walked out on you for good. We all have our little family troubles. You and she—well, you've been going it pretty hot and heavy for quite a while. We've all known it. But she'll get over it."

And then Bellini. Damn Bellini!

Mr. Kolitt drained the contents of his bottle and leaned over to place the empty container on the floor. He lay back, enjoying the pleasant sensation of warmth that crept through him as the liquor found its way into his internals. Bellini was a superstitious young idiot, nothing else! His ideas were soap-bubbles filled with hot air. How could you bring something to life just by imagining it?

He turned suddenly on his side and peered at the bureau. The room was darker than usual, because the rain outside was a cold rain, and the combination of cold outside and warmth inside had fogged the window-pane. The huge bureau in the corner was a mastodonic shape of gloom, cloaked at one end in a winding-sheet of changing green light. It was neither hound nor horse tonight, Mr. Kolitt reflected. It was merely a swollen hulk with protruding eyes. What would Bellini say to that?

"Well, I won't look at the damned thing," he thought drunkenly. "I'll pack off to sleep and forget it."

But he looked, because the thing was fixed firmly in his mind, and his eyes refused to remain closed. Again and again he cursed himself for looking; but when he was not looking he was wondering what new shape the thing in the corner had assumed, and then his eyes opened again to find out.

This was foolish, too, because the thing

had not changed shape since he had first peered at it. It was still a huge, bloated monstrosity with short, stumpy protuberances for legs, and a balloon-like excrescence for a head. "Like the thing in the movies tonight," he thought suddenly, and shuddered.

The thing in the movies had been a gigantic abhorrence supposedly called into being by obscene incantations. In the end, it had deliberately and awfully devoured its creator. Recalling those things, Mr. Kolitt gazed with renewed interest at the similar monster in his own room; then he shut his eyes and mumbled aloud:

"Ugh! I'll be giving myself D.T.s!"

For a while, this time, he succeeded in keeping his eyes closed, but he did not sleep. His thoughts were too vivid and his mind too alert to permit sleep. He wanted a drink, but was secretly glad that the bottle was empty. He had already drunk too much. The liquor was keeping him awake instead of making him drowsy. It was keeping alive the unpleasant parade of thoughts which persisted in marching through his mind. Especially was it keeping alive that annoying vision of Bellini, and the words that went with it.

Again Mr. Kolitt looked at the monster, and again shuddered violently.

"My God!" he muttered aloud. "I'd hate to bring *you* to life!"

The thought, expressed thus in blunt syllables, alarmed him infinitely more than when he had kept it to himself. He wanted all at once to recall it, lest the monster should take it seriously and heed the suggestion. He wanted, too, to get out of bed and turn on the light, thereby transforming the monster into its original form. But the light-switch was terrifyingly far away, and to reach it he would have to pass within a yard of the beast's bloated head.

There were several other things he wanted to do, too. He wanted to shriek at the thing to stop glaring at him, and he wanted to go into the next room and look at the clock, to see how long it would be before daylight filtered through the green-glowing window. Fearfully he considered the wisdom of tiptoeing to the window and drawing the shade, to shut out that green glare; but if he did that, the room would be in total darkness, and the horror would still be there even though invisible.

He no longer thought about Bellini, or about the other thing which lay in the bureau's lower drawers. He thought only of himself, and of his increasing terror. It was foolish terror, he knew. It was the result of going to the wrong kind of a movie, and listening to a mystery play on the radio, and reading a weird detective story, and guzzling too much liquor. But those things were done now, and could not be amended. And the monster was here, threatening him.

"But it's only wood," he mumbled. "It's not real."

If he got up and walked toward it, and touched it, his fear would be gone and he would be laughing at himself for being a drunken fool. That would be the end of *that*, and he could turn on the light and go to sleep in security. But if the thing *were* real—if it were not made of wood—and he walked toward it——

Another thought came then, and caused him to cringe back into the wall. *She* had sent it. She had created it, just as the man in the movies had created *his* monster. The thing hated him for what he had done to her. It meant to kill him.

He lay rigid, staring at it. Yes, it was moving, and it was moving of its own accord—not because of the mist on the window-pane. Its hideous head was swaying from side to side, not much, but enough

to be noticeable. Its small eyes were glaring maliciously. It was getting ready to attack him.

The blood ebbed from Mr. Kolitt's face. Slowly, with caution born of the fear which ate voraciously into him, he drew aside, inch by inch, the bed-clothes which covered him. Fearfully he wormed his legs toward the edge of the bed, and lowered them until his bare feet touched the floor. Not once did his wide eyes blink or his fixed gaze leave the greenish shape in the corner. If he could reach the threshold and slam the door shut behind him, there might be a possibility of escape. The hall door was but a few strides distant, and once in the hall he could run with all his might, shouting for help.

Warily he rose to a sitting position and put his hands behind him, pushing himself up. An eternity passed while his trembling body straightened and stood erect. Then he hesitated again, stifling the groan that welled to his lips.

The thing was eyeing him malevolently. It was not a creature of his imagination. It was real; he knew it was real. Its horrible head had stopped swaying; its bloated, swollen body was slowly expanding and contracting. It was waiting—waiting for him to make the first move. If he attempted to escape, if he took a single forward step, it would fall upon him.

Frantically he wrenched his gaze away from it and glanced toward the doorway. The door was open. His only chance lay in that direction. If he waited any longer——

He hurled himself forward. Three steps he took, and on the fourth he stood rigid, paralyzed by the sucking, scraping sound which rose behind him. He turned, terrified, and the thing seized him as he recoiled from it. The impact flung him to the floor. For a single horrific instant he stared up into the loathsome, undulating countenance above him. A scream jangled from his throat. Then his eyes and nose and mouth were smothered under an emanation of putrescent vileness, and that cavernous maw engulfed him.

EIGHT hours later the janitor discovered him there. The janitor, a red-faced, large-stomached Swede of more than middle age, shuffled past Mr. Kolitt's door with a garbage pail in his one hand and a mound of newspapers in his other. He had reached the mid-point in his daily round of collections. He wondered why Mr. Kolitt had failed to put out a waste-basket. Then he became aware of a most unpleasant and nauseating odor which filled the corridor. And, because the stench seemed to emanate from Mr. Kolitt's apartment, he knocked on Mr. Kolitt's door.

A moment later he let himself in with his own key.

He found Mr. Kolitt in the bedroom, midway between bed and doorway. Mr. Kolitt was dead. His legs and torso lay in a pool of dark red blood, and the entire upper portion of his plump body had been devoured. Those parts of him which remained were shapeless and unrecognizable beneath a pall of viscous green slime; and this foul excrescence, whose unbearable stench had first attracted the janitor's attention, extended from Mr. Kolitt's mutilated body to the bedroom window, where the sill was likewise coated with it.

These things the janitor saw and at first failed to assimilate. Unable to comprehend such horror, he merely stood staring. Then, believing his eyes at last, he shouted incoherent words in a guttural voice and leaned back against the wall, retching.

Later, a sober-faced Frenchwoman,

who was a modiste, sat in Mr. Kolitt's living-room and said to the policemen who were questioning her:

"I have told you all I know. There I was, sitting in my apartment across the court from this one, and I heard a man screaming. I put down my needle and thread and hurried to the window, and I saw the thing coming out of this man's window. I do not know what it was. There was rain falling, and I saw only what the green light from the advertising sign showed me. It was large and it was greenish; that is all I am sure of. So large was it that it seemed to fold together as it flowed over his window-sill, and then stretched itself out like a big fat slug when it crawled over the edge of the roof up above. That is all I know."

"But what in thunder *was* it?" one of the policemen demanded irritably.

Mr. Bellini, the ascetic-faced young man from downstairs, said quietly: "If you will come again into the bedroom, gentlemen, I will show you what it was." And when they had followed him there, he pointed unemotionally to the huge bureau in the corner, and said: "It was a monster he made out of this. It destroyed him because he learned somehow to fear it, and, fearing it, he willed it to do what it did."

"Huh?" mumbled one policeman. "Feared it? Why?"

"That I do not know."

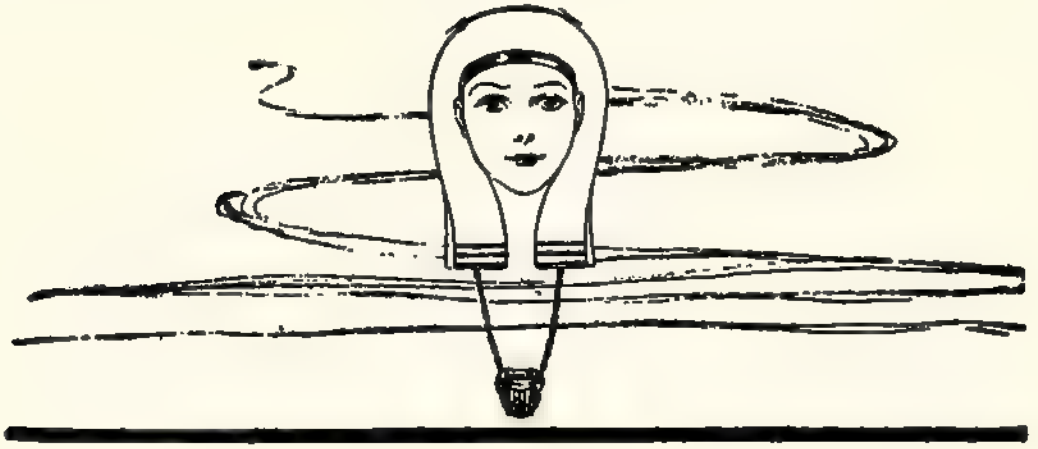
"Well, we'll damned soon find out," the policeman snapped. "Give me a hand here, Jenkins."

Beginning with the top drawer, the two policemen removed the bureau's contents. They did so carefully, inspecting each item before dropping it to the floor. In the third drawer from the bottom they found, wedged far back and buried beneath heavy articles of wearing-apparel, a woman's arm, wrapped in an oblong of torn sheeting which was caked with congealed blood.

In the next drawer they found four more blood-caked packages, which they unwrapped with increasing horror. In the last drawer of all they found a single large bundle which contained a woman's head.

Mr. Bellini, standing as near them as they would permit, gazed calmly into the woman's rigid features and said without emotion:

"It is his wife."



The Dead Man's Story

By JULIUS LONG

The unique experience of a man who could live through future events years before they happened in actuality

I AWOKE from a sound sleep. I lay deeply ensconced beneath the blankets of my ancient four-poster bed. Only the feeble rays of the moonlight penetrated through the tall, narrow windows of my bedchamber. They outlined four perpendicular triangles of soft light, which stood like buttresses within the walls. The high ceiling hung invisible above me. I had momentarily the sensation that I had been aroused from slumber in some large, old, decaying cathedral of Gothic design.

About my throat were clutched the bony fingers of a murderer. Through the nocturnal gloom I saw the satanic features of a man who seemed oddly familiar, yet uncannily unlike any human being I had ever known.

It was only slowly that it dawned upon my scarcely conscious mind that the face above me was that of Abner, my valet. I wondered why he looked so strange, why he was awakening me in the middle of the night. I began immediately to fear that some calamity had befallen Eloise, my not very loving wife. That she was out this night, I knew, for Eloise was always gone, enjoying herself with whoever would second her escape from the miserable invalid which I was. But I loved her, and feared without cessation for her well-being.

I summoned my somnolent energy in an effort to speak. My laryngeal muscles refused to obey. My voice remained captive in my throat.

With tremendous suddenness, as if to make up for wasted seconds of semi-consciousness, I realized that Abner was strangling me. I can not say why I had not sooner appreciated the awfulness of his purpose.

Involuntarily, every muscle of my body contracted, almost shaking me from Abner's grasp. As he reinforced his hold, my hands clutched wildly at his wrists. But I was feeble, stricken with a mortal, enervating disease. My efforts were pathetic. I knew with terrible certainty that I was doomed. I could only wait till the anesthesia of death palled upon me, robbing my body of life, at the same time freeing it of pain.

My pain was not that of suffocation. It was not feeling, but reason that told me how I was dying. I felt only the cruel nails of Abner's long fingers, the brittle bones of his ghastly hands as they sank inexorably into my flesh. I struggled not for breath, but to end the pain inflicted by that relentless grip. In my agony the thought flashed upon me that never before had I witnessed a more appalling manifestation of the irony of fate. Here was I, dying by the hand of a strangler, my attention monopolized by the superficial suffering from the wounds upon my neck! I recall with astounding clarity the acute pain caused by the ring on Abner's finger. It was turned inward, obviously to mutilate, and it was worn on his left hand. I had never before known him to wear a ring.

I rebelled against the unreasonableness of the situation. Such a thing could not

be! The entire affair seemed a horrible joke. Was I dreaming? Why would Abner do this thing to me?

It had never occurred to me that he could have had a motive for this crime. I had always been a decent and considerate master. During the twenty years of our association, we had been more like cronies than master and man. It was Abner who had made life supportable to me when Eloise had deserted my bedside to caper with the light folk of her set. It was he who had ever soothed my troubled nerves with his kind solicitude. Had all this show of good feeling been only the sycophantic fawning of an envious servant?

The pain became more intense. It occurred to me that my agony was unnecessarily prolonged. Almost simultaneously, however, I realized that in such a fateful predicament I would be without sense of proportion. Sounds expanded into minutes, and what must have required but a brief and terrific interval seemed to me a leisurely and deliberate act.

Abner's face disappeared beyond a motley of brightly flashing lights of unearthly colors. I became insensible to pain. I fell into oblivion.

EVENTUALLY I regained consciousness. But what a consciousness!

My very soul seemed to penetrate into every nook and cranny of that room. A spectator at my own tragedy, I saw myself lying supine in my bed. The murderous fingers of Abner still clutched my throat. He grunted as he tightened his grip in a last squeeze. He but wasted his strength, for I, his victim, was already dead.

For minutes he stood as if in a trance, benumbed by the terrific force of his suddenly released conscience. His murderous passion spent, he lapsed into the powerless apathy of the exhausted debauchee.

At last his natural hypocrisy came to his rescue. His mind, fed both by impulses from his subconscious thought and cant phrases accumulated through association with mankind, set about to rationalize his conduct. For egoistic and purely inexcusable motives, he unctuously substituted motives of an unselfish, even benevolent nature.

Abner's lips did not move, no sound issued from his throat. Nevertheless I heard the voice of his thought.

"Ah, Andrew Madison," said he, "you are no longer a great financier, a great philanthropist who gives only for profit. Little good will your famous wealth avail you now. You are only a sallow lump of organic matter on the way to becoming dirt. Your soul has gone to hell, Devil take it! I have served God by ending your days. I have even served you, for the disease which has kept you here in your bed would soon have finished you. I have put you out of your misery, and I shall make a neat profit for myself.

"For years I have waited for this moment. Bit by bit I have learned the combination to your wall safe. Many months more I have waited for you to fill it with negotiable securities. At last you have played into my hands. My hour has come. In a moment I shall have two hundred thousand dollars, all in unregistered bonds. I shall hide them where no eyes will discover them. Who will think of searching the hollow duralumin furniture of your wife's living-room? And if a discovery is made, I shall lose my fortune, but not my neck, for only your wife will be incriminated. I shall take this bloody ring and place it in a drawer of her dressing-table. It is her own ring, the engagement ring you yourself gave her, Andrew Madison! You

did not know that she removed it before she went out to her parties. She always has, Andrew Madison. She has always hated you. She married you only for your wealth. You should have known that, you ugly old fossil.

"She will be tried and convicted for your murder. Of this crime she is innocent, but she well deserves her fate—just as I, your faithful slave, deserve the wealth which will soon be mine. For years I have submitted to your overbearing will, endured the meanness of your petty ways. At last I shall have my reward. Thus is justice brought into the world!"

After this appalling speech (for though his lips did not move, I distinctly heard the voice of his thought), Abner stared idly upon my body. I, too, directed my gaze to the physical remnant of myself. I could not look upon the corpse with that detached indifference which I had so often felt in the presence of the dead. I seemed to retain in my corporeal self a very sympathetic and personal interest, the equity, as it were, of a retired senior partner.

Somewhere in the house there sounded with exaggerated clarity a loud creaking. The rising wind had probably strained a rafter of the roof. Abner started from his revery, and fear stirred within him. Appreciating his really precarious position, he hastily approached the wall safe and grasped the knob. He knew the combination well and was not long about the business. Greedily he removed the precious bonds which I had had my secretary insert there. He closed the little round door and retreated. After flinging one final, hateful look at my corpse, he left the room.

I FELT an impulse to follow him, but found that I could not venture from that body to which I seemed inexplicably attached. I remained in the shadows of my room, watching by my corpse.

Before very long I was constrained to admit that I was not a very lively companion. I became engrossed in sympathy for my poor carcass, much in the manner of any man who endures solitude for a very long while.

I wondered how soon I should be discovered. I felt very sorry for my neglect.

As daylight intruded into my room, I saw with horror the muscles of my limbs stiffen and tighten. I recognized the appearance of rigor mortis. I noted the lividness which had imperceptibly marred my throat. I turned in disgust from the clotted blood upon the wound made by the diamond ring Abner had worn for the purpose of incriminating Eloise.

Had a body now housed my soul, I would have shuddered, for the very thought of the fate which awaited my wife oppressed me with unendurable force.

All that which Abner had said of Eloise was true. Nevertheless I bore her no malice, but only a feeling of sympathy and understanding. When we were together, as was rarely the case, it was I who felt the guiltier. Though the girl had married me for my wealth and position, though I was repugnant to her sight, I was able to appreciate her dreams and ambitions. I knew that she hoped for my death. What disturbed me more at the moment was the knowledge that others were aware of her attitude. The servants, her friends and her relatives knew of her silent prayer that I should by death free her of my burdensome company. The stage was set for a great and unavoidable judicial error, and I trembled from sympathy for its victim.

Despite the judgment of more sober men, Eloise had brought me more of happiness than displeasure, more of light

than darkness. She was one of those rare creatures whose mere existence is enough to awaken an unselfish delight. Her habitation of my home made life in it endurable. That she was indifferent to me seemed immaterial. She was like a beautiful work of art which does not displease us the less because of its impersonality.

Such was my emotion, my dread.

After what seemed an eternity, Abner himself appeared in the room. He was so thoroughly hypocritical that, despite the absence of witnesses, he simulated all the emotions fitting the occasion. He even managed to achieve a semblance of grief.

There was genuine horror in his voice as he summoned the police with the phone at my bedside. He rushed out of the room.

He reappeared soon afterward, Eloise at his side. Her grief was more sincere than I had any right to expect. An emotional reaction made itself felt within her. Hatred gave way to a sympathy which merged subtly into love. Repentance wrung tears from her eyes. Abner retreated with a delicacy of feeling that was a refinement of hypocrisy.

Alone, her bosom undulating rapidly beneath the soft caresses of her white silken lingerie, Eloise looked down upon my expressionless face and prayed silently for my forgiveness.

I would have given my eternity to have been able to speak to her, to have assured her that I bore her no malice, but only the kindliest of understanding.

Eloise was standing there when the police arrived. They prodded her with idiotic questions, they tortured her with insolent innuendoes. Before very long, a detective appeared triumphantly with the ring Abner had planted. Eloise was boldly accused of my murder. She was too much overcome to defend herself, too startled to comprehend the course of events which was tightening like a noose around her throat. She fell hysterically sobbing beside my bed. The photographers greedily recorded her misery.

An assistant district attorney came officiously into my chamber and made his importance unpleasantly felt by Eloise, over whom he leered like an omnipotent god.

A matron from the jail came and took Eloise away.

As she passed from my sight, out of my vision for ever, an overwhelming anguish, a spiritual pain such as no mortal man has ever suffered, seized me, and I—my spirit—writhed. I could not endure this final forced desertion of my beloved Eloise at the very moment when her heart was opened to me. I sought extinction. Blackness enveloped me.

YOU, my reader, will say that I have dreamed a dream, endured the torture of a nightmare. You may believe that I have been the victim of a frightful hallucination. But you err.

It has been my singular privilege to experience my own assassination in advance of the fact. By some strange circumstance, I have been permitted often to live twice the more significant episodes of my life. It has been as if the needle of a phonograph had slipped upon the record and played a few bars ahead of time, then returned to its original position to play in its proper sequence the melody recorded. Such, at least, is the nearest analogy I can find to describe the phenomenon of which I write.

I have pondered much upon my strange experiences without ever achieving a very satisfactory explanation of their being. Perhaps the mind of man is only a sort of phonograph for the reception of events in their proper order. Some machines

are improperly constructed, and the sequence is occasionally broken. If such be the case, such a machine am I.

I suppose there are some who would envy me my faculty to read into the future. They would like to live twice through the happiest moments of their lives, even at the cost of enduring its most agonizing misfortunes. But they are deluded. "Fortune," says Machiavelli, "is a woman who to be kept under must be beaten and roughly handled." Alas! to me Fortune is only a woman whose blandishments have become uncomfortably familiar. I taste of her favors long before she chooses to bestow them, and her pretty speeches have bored me years before they leave her lips. Far away, she is a beautiful ideal; close up, she is only a vixen with a reproach.

My motive for writing this account of my adventure into the supernatural is to save my beloved Eloise from the fate my ungrateful valet, Abner, has so maliciously planned for her.

You may wonder why I do not send Abner away. I marvel at my own inactivity.

My end is near. I am confined to my bed—my death-bed. I know not precisely when I shall awaken to discover the murderous Abner above me, but I am certain the day is not distantly removed. I feel powerless to alter my fate. "Against this mysterious force rebellion is in vain, for all history proves that men may second Fortune, but can not oppose her; may weave her webs, but can not break them."

Thus I struggle not to alter fate, to postpone my death. I desire only to spare Eloise the legal execution Abner has planned for her. I shall deem myself rewarded if once again I can see love swell her sweet bosom and rout revulsion from her heart. Such is the price of love.

* * * * * * *

Note by Former District Attorney Wade

I HAVE submitted the above document in the best of faith. It was given to me by Andrew Madison's lawyers shortly after his murder. It was sealed in an envelope which bore the inscription: "To the District Attorney of D——— County, to be opened by him after the discovery of my body."

I would have dismissed this bizarre yarn as the pathetic drooling of a moribund old man had not the cold and stiffened corpse of Andrew Madison borne silent testimony to his prophetic truth.

After I had recovered the bonds from the hollow legs of the duralumin furniture, I was convinced that I dealt with an authentic description of what had occurred. The subsequent confession of Mr. Madison's valet, Abner, confirmed every last detail of the manuscript.

In short, Andrew Madison did prelive, as it were, the episode of his death and the supernatural life immediately succeeding the event.

I have recently consulted with several eminent psychologists concerning this unusual case. A celebrated member of the fraternity has argued that if Mr. Madison really did live through his future, he would have called to mind his previous experience. When the man was finally murdered, he certainly remembered his previous view of the scene. Yet Mr. Madison, when writing of it, does not mention any such recollection.

The argument is not without weight. However, another psychologist, equally respected for his integrity, has advanced the opinion that Mr. Madison might have become amnesic to his former experience. Thus his story is acquitted of inconsistency.

Mr. Madison's attorneys have prom-

ised to examine his papers to discover if possible the existence of other accounts of his most extraordinary experiences. It is to be hoped that more light will eventually be thrown upon his excursions into the future.

Ballade of Creatures Abroad by Night

By WILFRED BLANCH TALMAN

These are the creatures abroad by day:
  Fauns and satyrs and elves and gnomes;
Naiads and dryads and centaurs play
  As Great Pan pipes in their forest homes,
But soon after sundown the werewolf roams,
  His eyes agleam in the witch-fire's light;
The old crones' brew in their cauldron foams—
  These are the creatures abroad by night!

Drunken old Dutchmen Van Winkle knew
  Play at bowls with a thunder cloud;
Jovial phantoms by day, these few,
  Till dusk brings ghouls with an earth-stained shroud
And demons of dreadfulness, bloody-browed.
  When doors and casements are fastened tight
To keep out the spell of the ghostly crowd—
  These are the creatures abroad by night!

High on the peak of a Kaatskill crag
  The Old Squaw drowses till evenglow;
Darkness awakens the fiendish hag
  And spirits marshalled by Manitou.
Pallid-tongued specters that whimper low,
  Astride the winds on a vampire-flight,
With slavering priests to the sabbat go—
  These are the creatures abroad by night!

Crown Prince of Darkness, Satanus, pray
  Pierce our eardrums and blind our sight;
Nor haunt us, lest we become as they—
  These are the creatures abroad by night!

Death-Waters*

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG, JR.

WE WERE seated in the pilot house of the *Habakkuk*, a queer little tug which carries daily passengers from New York steamers south along the coast of Honduras, from Trujillo to the Carataska lagoon. We were a chatty, odd group. Shabby promoters elbowed enthusiastic young naturalists (botanists from Olanchito, and entomologists from beyond Jamalteca) and tired, disillusioned surveyors from the Plateau. The air was thick with unwholesome bluish smoke from fantastic pipes, which formed curious nimbuses about the heads of the older men. No one had a reputation to lose, and conversation was genial and unaffected.

One of the veterans stood in the center of the cabin and pounded with his fists upon a small wooden table. His face was the color of ripe corn, and from time to time he nodded at his companion. His companion did not return his salutations. The face of his companion was covered, and he lay upon the floor in an oblong box six feet long. No word of complaint issued from the box, and yet, whenever the veteran brought his eyes to bear upon the fastened lid, tears of pity ran rapidly down his cheeks and dampened his reddish beard. But he acknowledged to himself that the tears were blatantly sentimental, and not quite in good taste.

Every one else in the cabin ignored the existence of the man in the box—perhaps intentionally. A man's popularity depends largely upon his attitude. The attitude of the man in the box was not pleasing, since he had been dead for precisely four days. The veteran choked out his words fiercely between ominous coughs.

"My dear friends, you must be sensible of my embarrassment. It is my opinion that I am not an orator, and it is impossible for me to make you understand. I can explain, but you will never understand. There were millions of them, and they came after *him*. They attacked me only when I defended him. But it was hard—to see him collapse and turn black. The skin on his face shriveled up before he could speak. He never left me a last word. It is very hard, when one is a devoted friend! And yet his perversity was absurd. He brought it upon himself. I warned him. 'The man has a warm temper,' I said. 'You must be careful. You

* From WEIRD TALES for December, 1924.

must humor him. It is not good to provoke a man without taste.' A little thing would have been sufficient, a small compromise — but Byrne lacked a sense of humor. He paid horribly. He died on his feet, with the nasty things stabbing him, and he never emitted a shriek—only a gurgling sob."

The veteran looked reproachfully at the six-foot box, and the ceiling.

"I don't blame you for thinking me queer—but how do you explain this?—and this?" he added, rolling up his sleeve and baring a scrawny brown arm.

We pressed forward and surrounded him. We were eager and amused, and a sleepy Indian in the corner ran his fingers through his fragile black beard, and tittered.

The veteran's arm was covered with tiny yellow scars. The skin had evidently been punctured repeatedly by some pin-like instrument. Each scar was surrounded by a miniature halo of inflamed tissue.

"Can any of you explain 'em?" he asked.

He drummed on the taut skin. He was a tired, nervous little man, with faded blue eyes and eyebrows that met above the arch of his nose. He had an amusing habit of screwing up the corners of his mouth whenever he spoke.

One of the young men took him solemnly aside and whispered something into his ear.

The man with the punctured arm laughed. "Righto!" he said.

The young man closed his eyes and shuddered. "You—you shouldn't be alive." The youth had great difficulty in getting his lips to shape the words properly. "It isn't a bit of all right, you know! One bite is nearly always fatal, and you—you have dozens of 'em."

"Precisely!" Our man of the scars screwed up his lips and looked piercingly at us all. Some faces fell or blanched before him, but most of the young men returned a questioning gaze. "You know that the culebra de sangre is more certain than the taboa, more deadly than the rattler, more vicious than the corali. Well, I've been bitten ten times by culebras, five times by rattlers and thrice by our innocent little friend, the boba.

"I took great pains to verify these facts by studying the wounds, for each snake inflicts a slightly different one. Then how is it that I am still alive? My dear friends, you must believe me when I say that I do not know. Perhaps the poisons neutralized each other. Perhaps the venom of culebra de sangre is an antidote for that of the rattler, or vice versa. But it is enough that I stand here and talk to you. It is enough that I find within me the strength of youth—but my heart is dead."

His last comment seemed melodramatic and unnecessary, and we suddenly realized that the veteran was not an artist. He lacked a sense of dramatic values. We turned wearily aside, and puffed vigorously on our long pipes. It is difficult to forgive these little defects of technique.

The veteran seemed sufficiently conscious of our reproach. But he kept right on, and his voice was low and muffled, and it was difficult to follow the turnings and twistings of his disconcerting narrative. I remember distinctly that he bored us at first, and spoke at great length about things that did not interest us at all, but suddenly his voice became gritty, like the raucous blundering of an amateur with a viol, and we pressed closer about him.

"I WOULD have you bear this constantly in mind: We were alone in the center of that lake, with no human being except a huge black savage within a radius of ten miles. It was risky business, of course, but Byrne was devilishly set on

making a chemical analysis of the water just above the source of our spring.

"He was amazingly enthusiastic. I didn't care to parade my emotions in the presence of the black man, and I longed to subdue the glitter in Byrne's eye. Enthusiasm grates upon a savage, and I could see that the black was decidedly piqued. Byrne stood up in the stern, and raved. I endeavored to make him sit down. From a tone of suppressed excitement his voice rose to a shout. 'It's the finest water in Honduras. There's a fortune in it—it means——'

"I cut him short with a cold, reproachful look that must have hurt him. He winced under it, and sat down. I was level-headed enough to avoid unnecessary enthusiasms.

"Well, there we were, two old men who had come all the way from New York for the privilege of sitting in the sun in the center of a black, miasmal lake, and examining water that would have shocked a professional scavenger. But Byrne was unusually shrewd in a detestable, business-like way and he knew very well that the value of water doesn't reside in its taste. He had carefully pointed out to me that whenever water is taken from the center of a lake directly over a well it can be bottled and sold under attractive labels without the slightest risk. I admired Byrne's sagacity, but I didn't like the way the cannibal in the front was looking at the sky. I don't mean to suggest that he actually was a cannibal or anything monstrous or abnormal, but I distrusted his damnable mannerisms.

"He sat hunched in the bow, with his back toward me, with his hands on his knees and his eyes turned toward the shore. He was naked to the waist, and his dark, oily skin glistened with perspiration. There was something tremendously impressive about the rigidity of his animal-like body, and I didn't like the lethal growth of crisp black hair on his chest and arms. The upper portion of his body was hideously tattooed.

"I wish I could make you perceive the deadly horror of the man. I couldn't look at him without an inevitable shudder, and I felt that I could never really know him, never break through his crust of reserve, never fathom the murky depths of his abominable soul. I knew that he had a soul, but every decent instinct in me revolted at the thought of coming into contact with it. And yet I realized with jubilation that the soul of the monster was buried very deep, and that it would scarcely show itself upon slight provocation. And we had done nothing to call it forth; we had acted reasonably decent.

"But Byrne lacked tact. He wasn't properly schooled in flattery and the polite usages of rational society. He somehow got the queer notion into his head that the water should be tasted then and there. He was naturally averse to tasting it himself, and he knew that I couldn't stomach spring water of any sort. But he had a weird idea that perhaps the water contained a septic poison, and he was determined to settle his doubts on the spot.

"He scooped up a cupful of the detestable stuff and carried it to his nose. Then he gave it to me to smell. I was properly horrified. The water was yellowish and alive with animalcules—but the horror of it did not reside in its appearance. Hot shame flushed scarlet over Byrne's face. I was brought sharply and agonizingly to a sense of spiritual guilt. 'We can't bottle that. It wouldn't be sportsmanship; it wouldn't be——'

" 'Of course we can bottle it. People like that sort of thing. The smell will be a splendid advertising asset. Who ever heard of medicinal spring water without an excessive smell? It is a great

feather in our cap. Didn't you suppose that a smell was absolutely necessary?'

" 'But——'

" 'Let us have no "buts." That water has made our fortune. It is only necessary now to discover its taste.'

"He laughed and pointed to the black man in the bow. I shook my head. But what can you do when a man is determined? And, after all, why should I defend a savage? I simply sat and stared while Byrne handed the cup to our black companion. The black sat up very stiff and straight, and a puzzled, hurt expression crept into his dark eyes. He looked fixedly at Byrne and at the cup, and then he looked away toward the sky. The muscles in his face began to contract, horribly. I didn't like it, and I motioned to Byrne to withdraw the cup.

"But Byrne was determined that the black should drink. The stubbornness of a northern man in equatorial latitudes is often shocking. I have always avoided that pose, but Byrne never failed to do the conventional thing under given circumstances.

"He virtually bifurcated the savage with his eyes, and did it without a trace of condescension. 'I'm not going to sit here and hold this! I want you to taste the water and tell me precisely what you think of it. Tell me whether you like the way it tastes, and after you have tasted it, if you feel somewhat out of sorts and a bit dizzy it is only necessary for you to describe your feelings. I don't want to force it upon you, but you can't sit there and refuse to take part in this—er—experiment!'

"The black removed his eyes from the sky and gazed scornfully into Byrne's face. 'No. I don't want this water. I didn't come out here to drink water.'

"Perhaps you have never seen the clash of two racially different wills, each as set and as primitive and as humorless as the other. A silent contest went on between Byrne and that black imp, and the latter's face kept getting more sinister and hostile; and I watched the muscles contracting and the eyes narrowing, and I began to feel sorry for Byrne.

"But even I hadn't fathomed Byrne's power of will. He dominated that savage through sheer psychic superiority. The black man didn't cower, but you could see that he knew he was fighting against fate.

"He knew that he had to drink the water; the fact had been settled when Byrne had first extended the cup, and his rebellion was pure resentment at the cruelty of Byrne in forcing the water upon him. I shall never forget the way he seized the cup and drained off the water. It was sickening to watch his teeth chatter and his eyes bulge as the water slid between his swollen lips. Great spasms seemed to run up and down his back, and I fancied that I could discern a velvety play of rebellious muscles throughout the whole length of his perspiring torso. Then he handed the cup back without a word, and began to look again at the sky.

"BYRNE waited for a moment or two, and then he commenced to question the black in a way which I did not think very tactful. But Byrne imagined that his spiritual supremacy had been firmly established. I could have pointed out to him—but I cry over spilt milk. I can see Byrne now, knee-deep in questions, with his eyes red. 'I made you drink that water because I wanted to know. It is very important that I should know. Have you ever tasted a bad egg? Did it taste like that? Did it have a salty flavor, and did it burn you when you swallowed it?'

"The black sat immobile and refused to answer. There is no understanding

the psychology of a black man in the center of a black lake. I felt that the perversity of nature had entered into the wretch, and I urged Byrne to ease up. But Byrne kept right on, and finally—it happened.

"The black stood up in the boat and shrieked—and shrieked again. You can not imagine the unearthly bestiality of the cries that proceeded out of his revolting throat. They were not human cries at all, and they might have come from a gorilla under torture. I could only sit and stare and listen, and I became as flabby as an arachnid on stilts. I felt at that moment nothing but unutterable fright, mixed with contempt for Byrne and his deliberate tempting of — well, not fate exactly, but the inexcusable phenomenon of cannibalistic hysteria. I longed to get up and shriek louder than the savage, in order to humiliate and shame him into silence.

"I thought at first, as the screams went echoing across the lake, that the black would upset the canoe. He was standing in the bow, and swaying from side to side, and with every lurch the canoe would ship some water. One cry followed another in maddening succession, and each cry was more sinister and virulent and unnatural, and I observed that the devil's body was drawn up as taut as an electric wire.

"Then Byrne began to tug at his shoulders in a frantic effort to make him sit down. It was a hideous sight to see them struggling and swaying in the bow, and I even began to pity the black. Byrne hung on viciously, and I suddenly became aware that he was pummeling his antagonist fiercely on the back and under the arms. 'Sit down, or you'll wreck us! Good heavens! To create such a rumpus —and for a triviality!'

"The canoe was filling rapidly, and I expected her to capsize at any moment. I didn't relish the thought of swimming through a noisome cesspool, and I glared incontinently at Byrne. Poor chap! Had I known, I should have been more tolerant. Byrne deserved censure, but he paid —paid horribly.

"The black devil sat down quite suddenly and looked at the sky. All of his rebellion seemed to leave him. There was a genial, almost enthusiastic expression on his loathsome face. He leered beneficently and patted Byrne on the shoulder. His familiarity shocked me, and I could see that it annoyed Byrne. The black's voice was peculiarly calm.

" 'I didn't mean anything, now. It's just the weather, I guess. I liked the water. I can't see why you shouldn't bottle it, and sell it. It's good water. I have often wondered why no one ever thought of bottling it before. The people who come out here are rather stupid, I guess.'

"Byrne looked at me rather sheepishly. The savage possessed intelligence and taste. His English was reasonably correct, and his manners were those of a gentleman. He had indeed acted outlandishly, and given us good reason to distrust him; but Byrne's tactics had been scurrilous, and deserving of rebuke.

"Byrne had sense enough to acknowledge his error. He grumbled a bit, but in conciliatory mood, and he asked the black to row to shore with a geniality that I thought admirable.

"BYRNE put his hand over the side and let it trail in the water. I lit a cigarette and watched the greenish tide swirl and eddy beneath us. It was some time before I glimpsed the first of the little obscenities.

"I tried to warn Byrne, but he suddenly drew his hand up with a shriek and I

knew that he would understand. 'Something bit me!' he said.

"I fancied that the black scowled and bent lower over his oars.

" 'Look at the water,' I replied.

"Byrne dropped his eyes, rather reluctantly, I thought. Then he blanched. 'Snakes — water snakes. Good Lord! Water snakes!' He repeated it again and again. 'Water snakes. There are thousands! Water snakes!'

" 'These are quite harmless. But I never saw anything like this before!' And I was indeed shocked. Imagine an unexpected upheaving of a million nasty little pink river snakes, from dank depths, and without rime or reason. They swam about the boat, and struck their ugly little heads in the air, and hissed and shot out hideous tongues. I leaned over the boat and looked down into the greenish water. The river was alive with myriads of swaying pink bodies, which writhed in volatile contortions, and made the water foam and bubble. Then I saw that several had coiled themselves over the side of the canoe and were dropping down inside. I felt instinctively that the black devil had something to do with it.

"Such indignities were unthinkable. I stood up in the boat, and stormed. The black lifted his sleepy eyes and grinned broadly. But I saw that he was making directly for the shore. The snakes were crawling all about the boat, and they were attacking Byrne's legs, and their hissing sickened me. But I knew the species—a harmless and pretentious one. Still, the thought of taking them up by the tails and throwing them overboard was repugnant to me. And yet I knew that the noisome things horrified Byrne. He shrieked with the pain of their aggressive little bites and swore immoderately. When I assured him that they were innocuous he eyed me reproachfully and continued to mash them with the heels of his boots. He ground their loathsome heads into a pulp, and blood ran out of their tiny mouths and fairly flooded the bottom of the boat. But more kept dropping over the sides and Byrne had his hands full. And the black rowed fiercely toward the shore, and said nothing. But he smiled, which made me long to strangle him. But I didn't care to offend him, for his methods of retaliation were apt to be unsavory.

"We finally reached the shore. Byrne jumped out with a shout and waded through several feet of black, sluggish mud. Then he turned about on the shore and looked back over the water. The whole surface was covered with swimming pink bodies, and they crisscrossed, and interlaced on the top of the tides, and when the lurid sunlight fell upon them they resembled unctuous charnel worms seething and boiling in some colossal vat.

"I GOT out somehow and joined Byrne. We were furious when we saw the black push off and make for the opposite shore. Byrne was upset and nearly delirious, and he assured me that the snakes were poisonous.

" 'Don't be a fool,' I said. 'None of the water snakes hereabouts are poisonous. If you had any sense——'

" 'But why should they have attacked me? They crawled up and bit me. Why should they have done that? They were scions of Satan. That black enscorceled them! He called them, and they came!'

"I knew that Byrne was developing a monomania, and I sought to divert him. 'You have nothing to fear. Had we rattlers or culebras de sangre to deal with, but water snakes—bah!'

"Then I saw that the black was standing up in the canoe and waving his arms and shrieking exultantly. I turned about and looked up toward the crest of the hill

in back of us. It was a savage hill and it rose wild and bleak before us, and over the crest of it there poured an army of slithering things—and it is impossible for me to describe them in detail.

"I didn't want Byrne to turn about. I sought to keep him interested in the lake, and in the black devil who was standing up in the canoe and shouting. I pointed out to him that the black had made himself ridiculous, and I slapped him soundly on the back and we congratulated each other on our superiority.

"But eventually I had to face them—the things that were crawling upon us from over the somber gray crest of the hill. I turned and I looked at the deep blue sky and the great clouds rolling over the summit, and then my eyes went a little lower, and I saw them again, and knew that they were crawling slowly toward us and that there was no avoiding them.

"And I gently took Byrne by the arm, and turned him about and pointed silently. There were tears in my eyes, and a curious heaviness in my legs and arms. But Byrne bore it like a gentleman. He didn't even express surprize, although I could clearly perceive that his soul had been mortally wounded, and was sick unto death. And I saw shame and a monstrous fear staring at me out of Byrne's bloodshot eyes. And I pitied Byrne, but I knew what we had to do.

"The day was drawing to a close, amidst lovely earth-mists, which hung over the hill; and blue veils made the water gorgeous and hid the canoe and the gesticulating savage. I longed to sit calmly down there by the water, and to dream, but I knew that we had something to do. Near the edge of the water we found a gleaming yellow growth of shrubs and of stout vegetation, and we made stout clubs and strong cutting whips. And the army of reptiles continued to advance, and they filled me with a sense of infinite sadness, and regret and pity for Byrne.

"We stood very still and waited; and the mass of seething corruption rolled down the hill until it reached the level rocky lake shore, and then it oozed obnoxiously toward us. And we cried out when we counted the number of rattlers and culebras and bobas, but when we saw the other snakes we did not cry at all, for the centers of speech froze up in us, and we were very unhappy.

"My dear friends, you can not imagine, you can not conceive of our unhappiness. There were charnel reptiles with green, flattened heads and glazed eyes, which I did not attempt to identify, and there were legions of horned lizards, with blistered black tongues, and little venomous toads that hopped nervously about and made odd, weird noises in their throats; and we knew that they were lethal, and to be avoided.

"But we met them face to face, and Byrne fought with genuine nobility. But the odds were overwhelming, and I saw him go down, panting, suffocated, annihilated. They crawled up his legs, and they bit him in the back and sides, and on the face, and I saw his face blacken before my eyes. I saw his lips writhe back from his teeth, and his eyes glaze, and the skin on his face pucker and shrivel.

"And I fought to keep them from him, and my club was never idle. I flattened innumerable heads that were round, and I rounded heads that were flat, and I made sickening crimson pellets out of quivering gelatinous tissue.

"MY DEAR friends, they went away at last, and left him there. And the blue calm of the hills seemed inexplicable under the circumstances, but I was thank-

ful for the coolness and quiet, and the deepening shadows. I sat down with peace in my soul, and waited. I looked at the tiny punctures on my arms, and I smiled. I was reasonably happy.

"But my dear friends, I did not die. The realization that I was not to die amazed me. It was several hours before I could be certain, and then I did a shocking thing. I took my beard firmly between my two hands and pulled out the hair in great tufts. The pain sobered me.

"I tramped for two days with the body. It was the decent, the proper thing to do. I waited in Trujillo for the fashioning of the coffin, and I personally supervised its construction. I wanted everything done properly, in the grand manner. I have very few regrets—but my soul is dead!"

There was an infinite misery in the veteran's eye. His voice grew raucous, and he stopped talking. We noticed that he shivered a little as he turned up his collar and went out through the cabin door into a night of stars. We pressed our faces against the glass of the one window and saw him standing before the rail, with the rain and moonlight glistening upon his beard, and the salt spray striking against his incredibly chastened face.

Deserted House

By MARION DOYLE

I thought:
Here are but echoing emptiness and dust,
Silence and mystery, dead dreams of old desires;
But over the foot-marred threshold shadows thrust
Their fingers, groping for the phantom fires
Of a pale moon's light that lies like sunlight spent
Upon the tangled grasses of the lawn;
Here are faint, half-heard whispers, eloquent
Of vanished voices; the phenomenon
Of printless footfalls; on the rotted rafter,
Perched like storm-driven and bewildered birds,
Flutter the shades of long-lost tears and laughter,
Of ruffled, smooth, of gray and irised words:

Hearing the echoed cries of birth and death,
Hearing the muted whisper of old vows,
There is a Something catches at the breath;
Something defies the name—Deserted House.

A LETTER from Duane W. Rinnel, of Asotin, Washington, makes a suggestion which we have received with more and more frequency lately. He writes to the Eyrie: "Why not have an 'author's page' in WEIRD TALES? This could cover a sketch of the chosen writer's life and literary career, with perhaps a photograph. I am sure other readers would join me in such a plea. We do not really know who your contributors are, in a broad sense—how old are they? where do they live? etc. For me this would enhance WEIRD TALES immensely."

How about it, readers? Shall we publish an author's page as a feature of this magazine? Or shall we include information about the authors in the Eyrie?

E. L. Mengshoel, of Minneapolis, writes to the Eyrie: "It is with great pleasure that I acknowledge the excellence of your July issue. Being entirely free from that would-be 'scientific' crazy space-stuff, that issue contained nothing to evoke my aversion. On the other hand, almost every one of the stories gave me a thrill such as hardly could be surpassed even by 'notre cher monsieur' Jules de Grandin's 'cognacs et champagnes exquis'. Apropos—that delightful gentleman's performance in Seabury Quinn's *The Hand of Glory* impressed me as one of the chief entertainments on the July program. However, I am tempted to give Hazel Heald's *The Horror in the Museum* the very first place in my estimation, excepting the wonderful serial, Jack Williamson's *Golden Blood,* which is a story worthy of a Rider Haggard."

"A word of praise for your July issue, the best in over a year," writes B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts. "Jack Williamson's fine novel, *Golden Blood,* is one of the greatest tales of fantasy I have ever had the pleasure of reading. Let's have another by him in the near future. H. P. Lovecraft's tale of witchcraft and the elder gods, *The Dreams in the Witch-House,* was superb; while not far behind was Hazel Heald's *The Horror in the Museum*—a particularly exceptional tale for a woman to write, in that she built up the horror sequence as few women writers have ever been capable of doing. Sometime soon, please reprint your *best* story, E. Hoffmann Price's exquisite fantasy of moonbeams on an Oriental carpet: *The Girl from Samarcand.*"

A letter from John W. Bennett, of Milwaukee, says: "I have just finished reading H. P. Lovecraft's *The Dreams in the Witch-House* in your July issue. I'm still shivering. Allow me to say it is a masterpiece of weird fiction. Lovecraft very, very closely approaches the ultimate, shuddery horror of Poe or Blackwood."

Writes H. M. Jacobson, of Rochester, New York: "I enjoy, above all others, those delightfully fantastic stories by Clark Ashton Smith, and by another gentleman whose name I do not recall, whose short pastel, *The Weird of Avoosl Wuthoqquan,*

appeared in a recent issue. My notions of weird stories tend rather to the fine and utterly fantastic, even the grotesque. I enjoy especially those tales which deal with impossible cities and civilizations, and forgotten, unheard-of gods." [*The Weird of Avoosl Wuthoqquan* was also by Clark Ashton Smith.—THE EDITORS.]

A reader, who signs himself "A Cover Connoisseur," sends to the Eyrie a post card from Los Angeles: "I am delighted with your attractive blue WEIRD TALES cover for July. Or should I say, amused?—for it is of great interest to watch how your artist monthly contrives to keep the charms of unclad girls *just* concealed by a wisp of smoke or some tenuous bit of material. It's lucky the villains usually make it hot for them."

"I was very glad to greet our old friend Jules de Grandin again after an absence of four months," writes J. D. Arden, of Detroit. "Please don't let him stay away so long the next time he decides to take a 'vacation'. Another old acquaintance I was much pleased to see was H. P. Lovecraft. You don't see Lovecraft very often, but when you do it sort of makes up for his long absences. Will you kindly tell us readers your reason for not reprinting A. Merritt's story, *The Woman of the Wood?* You have continuously evaded this question, but I am trying again." [Requests that we reprint Mr. Merritt's story have become so numerous that we have decided to publish it as our regular Weird Story Reprint in one of the next few issues.—THE EDITORS.]

Paul Ernst, of Chicago, writes: "I just bought a current WEIRD TALES this morning, and had to drop you a line of congratulation. I think it has the most striking cover in a progression of covers that have grown more and more striking over the last year. It's a peach."

Jack Darrow, of Chicago, writes in praise of Jack Williamson's remarkable serial. "The fourth part of *Golden Blood* should easily take first place in the July issue of WEIRD TALES," writes Mr. Darrow. "I especially liked the description of the room of the golden mist. This marvelous novel should be put in book form with the best of paper and binding. Another fine tale in an entirely different vein is H. P. Lovecraft's latest masterpiece, *The Dreams in the Witch-House*. Where does Mr. Lovecraft obtain his material for such tales anyway?"

Here is a brickbat from F. W. Lawrence, of Enfield, England: "I have just finished the May issue of WT, and I think the best tale in this issue is H. Warner Munn's *The Wheel*. But *The Girl with the Green Eyes* was, in my opinion, very poor. If Doctor Jemison is a typical American doctor, all I can say is that I'm very sorry for you. I'd rather doctor myself than call him in. His stupid questions quite made me feel cross. And why, oh why, Mr. Editor, must some of your authors have to wave a leaf of a holy book in his eyes to thwart the machinations of an 'evil being'? It seems in these days of scientific methods a terribly weak way of overcoming a difficulty. Might I ask: would a leaf from the Koran or the Zend Avesta or other holy work prove as efficacious as our own Bible? I wish one of your authors would invent some sort of electrical pistol to pump about 100,000 volts into a vampire or other such obnoxious spirit. I think that probably even an 'evil being' might feel rather uncomfortable at such treatment. Bring forth the weird, horrible and creepy tales, Mr. Editor, and I shall be yours for always."

"Compliments on your June *Black Colossus* cover!" writes Henry Kuttner, of Hollywood, California. "It embodies the spirit of the magazine excellently; and the

conventional jade background of the statue against the vibrant nude, together with the black backing, is mighty effective. Don't be afraid of originality—you may at times fall short of the mark, but the motive is there."

Writes Orlaf Polege, of Tomahawk, Wisconsin: "Just a few lines to tell you how I enjoyed the June issue of WEIRD TALES. It is absolutely the best fiction magazine in the market. Robert E. Howard is my favorite author, and next to him I like Carl Jacobi. I also greatly enjoy reading Seabury Quinn's stories and admire his character, Jules de Grandin. You can't give me too many vampire tales."

E. Brown, of Newport, Kentucky, writes to the Eyrie: "*Golden Blood* is so unusual, and excellent in all ways. And as for your reprint story, *Green Tea,* I like the restrained type of writing in this, which yet builds up sustained suspense—and the beautifully done touches of atmosphere like the dark trees and sunset light. I hate your naked women covers. They look like a filthy sort of 'sex' magazine and don't fit the general tone of your magazine."

In a letter to the Eyrie, Robert Bloch, of Milwaukee, says in part: "Your new issue is superb—the best in some time. Lovecraft scores heavily. Yessir, Grandpa Cthulhu's new story takes the cake—real writing, real background, real horror. Second place goes, of course, to the second-best writer, Clark Ashton Smith. His infusion of color into prosaic plots is true literary achievement. Outside of Quinn's and Hamilton's stuff, WT is, as ever, O. K., as long as Lovecraft, Smith, Howard, Long, Wandrei and Price continue to provide you with thrilling, unearthly stories to jolt the jaded reader out of commonplace monotonies."

Readers, what story do you like best in this issue? And if there are any stories that you do not like, please let us know which ones, and why you don't like them. The most popular story in our July issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was H. P. Lovecraft's fantastic tale of horror, *The Dreams in the Witch-House.*

My favorite stories in the September WEIRD TALES are:

Story	Remarks
(1)_____	_____
(2)_____	_____
(3)_____	_____

I do not like the following stories:

(1)_____	Why?_____
(2)_____	_____

It will help us to know what kind of stories you want in Weird Tales if you will fill out this coupon and mail it to The Eyrie, Weird Tales, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

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Coming Next Month

CONAN'S manner of fighting was unorthodox, but instinctive and natural as that of a timber wolf. The intricacies of the sword were as useless against his primitive fury as a human boxer's skill against the onslaughts of a panther.

Fighting as he had never fought before, straining every last ounce of effort to parry Conan's blade that flickered like lightning about his head, the pirate captain in desperation caught a full stroke near his hilt, and felt his whole arm go numb beneath the terrific impact. That stroke was instantly followed by a thrust with such terrible drive behind it that the sharp point ripped through chain-mail and ribs like paper, to transfix the heart beneath. The buccaneer's lips writhed in brief agony, but, grim to the last, he made no sound. He was dead before his body relaxed on the trampled grass, where blood drops glittered like split rubies in the sun.

Conan shook the red drops from his sword, grinned with unaffected pleasure, stretched like a huge cat—and abruptly stiffened, the expression of satisfaction on his face being replaced by a stare of bewilderment. He stood like a statue, his sword trailing in his hand.

As he lifted his eyes from his vanquished foe, they had absently rested on the surrounding trees, and the vistas seen beyond. And he had seen a fantastic thing—a thing incredible and inexplicable. Over the soft rounded green shoulder of a distant slope had loped a tall black naked figure, bearing on its shoulder an equally naked white form. The apparition vanished as suddenly as it had appeared, leaving the watcher gasping in surprize.

Conan stared about him, glanced uncertainly back the way he had come, and swore. In the midst of realistic, if exotic surroundings, a vagrant image of fantasy and nightmare had been introduced. Conan doubted neither his eyesight nor his sanity. He had seen something alien and uncanny, he knew; the mere fact of a black figure racing across the landscape carrying a white captive was bizarre enough; but this black figure had been unnaturally *tall*. . . .

You can not afford to miss this tale, which is one of the strangest stories ever told —a tale of naked black giants, a barbarian adventurer, and the blood-freezing horror that awaited a pirate crew at the jade-green pool. This powerful story will be printed complete in the October WEIRD TALES:

THE POOL OF THE BLACK ONE

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

—ALSO—

THE MANSION OF UNHOLY MAGIC

By Seabury Quinn

An eery tale, with chills, thrills and shudders a-plenty, about a brilliant exploit of the dauntless little French scientist, Jules de Grandin.

THE HOUSE OF THE WORM

By Mearle Prout

A powerful story of a hideous blight that spread from an unholy forest and menaced mankind with destruction.

THE PLUTONIAN TERROR

By Jack Williamson

A grim story of the planet Pluto, and a dread power that swept our Earth clear of human beings—a fascinating tale of interplanetary adventures and horrible death.

THE VAMPIRE MASTER

By Hugh Davidson

A thrilling novel of corpses that would not stay dead, and a gruesome horror in the hills of New York.

THE SEED FROM THE SEPULCHER

By Clark Ashton Smith

A horror-tale of the Venezuelan jungles, and a diabolical plant that lived on human life.

Oct. WEIRD TALES Out Oct. 1

A Vintage From Atlantis

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

A fantastic story of a jar of wine, mellowed through many centuries, that was washed ashore on a pirate-infested isle in the West Indies

I THANK you, friend, but I am no drinker of wine, not even if it be the rarest Canary or the oldest Amontillado. Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging . . . and more than others, I have reason to know the truth that was writ by Solomon the Jewish king. Give ear, if ye will, and I shall tell you a story such as would halt the half-drained cup on the lips of the hardiest bibber.

We were seven-and-thirty buccaneers, who raked the Spanish Main under Barnaby Dwale, he that was called Red Barnaby for the spilling of blood that attended him everywhere. Our ship, the *Black Falcon,* could outfly and outstrike all other craft that flew the Jolly Roger. Full often, Captain Dwale was wont to seek a remote isle on the eastward verge of the West Indies, and lighten the vessel of its weight of ingots and doubloons.

The isle was far from the common course of maritime traffic, and was not known to maps or other mariners; so it suited our purpose well. It was a place of palms and sand and cliffs, with a small harbor sheltered by the curving outstretched arms of rugged reefs, on which the dark ocean climbed and gnashed its fangs of white foam without troubling the tranquil waters beyond. I know not how many times we had visited the isle; but the soil beneath many a coco-tree was heavy with our hidden trove. There we had stored the loot of bullion-laden ships, the massy plate and jewels of cathedral towns.

Even as to all mortal things, an ending came at last to our visits. We had gathered a goodly cargo, but might have stayed longer on the open main where the Spaniards passed, if a tempest had not impended. We were near the secret isle, as it chanced, when the skies began to blacken; and wallowing heavily in the rising seas we fled to our placid harbor, reaching it by nightfall. Before dawn the hurricane had blown by; and the sun came up in cloudless amber and blue. We proceeded with the landing and burying of our chests of coin and gems and ingots, which was a task of some length; and afterward we re-filled our water-casks at a cool sweet spring that ran from beneath the palmy hill not far inland.

It was now midafternoon. Captain Dwale was planning to weigh anchor shortly and follow the westering sun toward the Caribbees. There were nine of us, loading the last barrels into the boats, with Red Barnaby looking on and cursing us for being slower than mud-turtles; and we were bending knee-deep in the tepid, lazy water, when suddenly the captain ceased to swear, and we saw that he was no longer watching us. He had turned his back and was stooping over a strange object that must have drifted in with the tide, after the storm: a huge and barnacle-laden thing that lay on the sand, half in and half out of the shoaling water. Somehow, none of us had perceived it heretofore.

Red Barnaby was not silent long.

"Come here, ye chancre-eaten coistrels," he called to us. We obeyed willingly enough, and gathered around the beached object, which our captain was examining with much perplexity. We too were greatly be-wondered when we saw the thing more closely; and none of us could name it offhand or with certainty.

The object had the form of a great jar, with a tapering neck and a deep, round, abdominous body. It was wholly encrusted with shells and corals that had gathered upon it as if through many ages in the ocean deeps, and was festooned with weeds and sea-flowers such as we had never before beheld; so that we could not determine the substance of which it was made.

At the order of Captain Dwale, we rolled it out of the water and beyond reach of the tide, into the shade of near-by palms; though it required the efforts of four men to move the unwieldy thing, which was strangely ponderous. We found that it would stand easily on end, with its top reaching almost to the shoulders of a tall man. While we were handling the great jar, we heard a swishing noise from within, as if it were filled with some sort of liquor.

Our captain, as it chanced, was a learned man.

"By the communion cup of Satan!" he swore. "If this thing is not an antique wine-jar, then I am a Bedlamite. Such vessels—though mayhap they were not so huge—were employed by the Romans to store the goodly vintages of Falernus and Cecuba. Indeed, there is today a Spanish wine—that of Valdepeñas—which is kept in earthen jars. But this, if I mistake not, is neither from Spain nor olden Rome. It is ancient enough, by its look, to have come from that long-sunken isle, the Atlantis whereof Plato speaks. Truly,

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there should be a rare vintage within, a wine that was mellowed in the youth of the world, before the founding of Rome and Athens; and which, perchance, has gathered fire and strength with the centuries. Ho! my rascal sea-bullies! We sail not from this harbor till the jar is broached. And if the liquor within be sound and potable, we shall make holiday this evening on the sands."

"Belike, 'tis a funeral urn, full of plaguey cinders and ashes," said the mate, Roger Aglone, who had a gloomy turn of thought.

Red Barnaby had drawn his cutlas and was busily prying away the crust of barnacles and quaint fantastic coral-growths from the top of the jar. Layer on layer of them he removed, and swore mightily at this increment of forgotten years. At last a great stopper of earthenware, sealed with a clear wax that had grown harder than amber, was revealed by his prying. The stopper was graven with queer letters of an unknown language, plainly to be seen; but the wax refused the cutlas-point. So, losing all patience, the captain seized a mighty fragment of stone, which a lesser man could scarce have lifted, and broke therewith the neck of the jar.

Now even in those days, I, Stephen Magbane, the one Puritan amid that Christless crew, was no bibber of wine or spirituous liquors, but a staunch Rechabite on all occasions. Therefore I held back, feeling little concern other than that of reprobation, while the others pressed about the jar and sniffed greedily at the contents. But, almost immediately with its opening, my nostrils were assailed by an odor of heathen spices, heavy and strange; and the very inhalation thereof caused me to feel a sort of giddiness, so that I thought it well to retreat still further. But the others were eager as midges around a fermenting-vat in autumn.

" 'Sblood! 'Tis a royal vintage!" roared the captain, after he had dipped a forefinger in the jar and sucked the purple drops that dripped from it. "Avast, ye slumgullions! Stow the water-casks on board, and summon all hands ashore, leaving only a watch there to ward the vessel. We'll have a gala night before we sack any more Spaniards."

We obeyed his order; and there was much rejoicing amid the crew of the *Black Falcon* at the news of our find and the postponement of the voyage. Three men, grumbling sorely at their absence from the revels, were left on board; though, in that tranquil harbor, such vigilance was virtually needless. We others returned to the shore, bringing a supply of pannikins in which to serve the wine, and provisions for a feast. Then we gathered pieces of drift with which to build a great fire, and caught several huge tortoises along the sands, and unearthed their hidden eggs, so that we might have an abundance and variety of victuals.

In these preparations I took part with no special ardor. Knowing my habit of abstention, and being of a somewhat malicious and tormenting humor, Captain Dwale had expressly commanded my presence at the feast. However, I anticipated nothing more than a little ribaldry at my expense, as was customary at such times; and being partial to fresh tortoise-meat, I was not wholly unresigned to my lot as a witness of the Babylonian inebrieties of the others.

At nightfall, the feasting and drinking began; and the fire of driftwood, with eery witch-colors of blue and green and white amid the flame, leapt high in the dusk while the sunset died to a handful of red embers far on purpling seas.

It was a strange wine that the crew and captain swilled from their pannikins. I saw that the stuff was thick and dark, as if it had been mingled with blood; and the air was filled with the reek of those pagan spices, hot and rich and unholy, that might have poured from a broken tomb of antique emperors. And stranger still was the intoxication of that wine; for those who drank it became still and thoughtful and sullen; and there was no singing of lewd songs, no playing of apish antics.

Red Barnaby had been drinking longer than the others, having begun to sample the vintage while the crew were making ready for their revel. To our wonderment, he ceased to swear at us after the first cupful, and no longer ordered us about or paid us any heed, but sat peering into the sunset with eyes that held the dazzlement of unknown dreams. And one by one, as they began to drink, the others were likewise affected, so that I marvelled much at the unwonted power of the wine. I had never before beheld an intoxication of such nature; for they spoke not nor ate, and moved only to refill their cups from the mighty jar.

The night had grown dark as indigo beyond the flickering fire, and there was no moon; and the firelight blinded the stars. But one by one, after an interval, the drinkers rose from their places and stood staring into the darkness toward the sea. Unquietly they stood, and strained forward, peering intently as men who behold some marvelous thing; and queerly they muttered to one another, with unintelligible words. I knew not why they stared and muttered thus, unless it were because of some madness that had come upon them from the wine; for naught was visible in the dark, and I heard nothing, save the low murmur of wavelets lapping on the sand.

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Louder grew the muttering; and some raised their hands and pointed seaward, babbling wildly as if in delirium. Noting their demeanor, and doubtful as to what further turn their madness might take, I bethought me to withdraw along the shore. But when I began to move away, those who were nearest me appeared to waken from their dream, and restrained me with rough hands. Then, with drunken, gibbering words, of which I could make no sense, they held me helpless while one of their number forced me to drink from a pannikin filled with the purple wine.

I FOUGHT against them, doubly unwilling to quaff that nameless vintage, and much of it was spilled. The stuff was sweet as liquid honey to the taste, but burned like hell-fire in my throat. I turned giddy; and a sort of dark confusion possessed my senses by degrees; and I seemed to hear and see and feel as in the mounting fever of calenture.

The air about me seemed to brighten, with a redness of ghostly blood that was everywhere; a light that came not from the fire nor from the nocturnal heavens. I beheld the faces and forms of the drinkers, standing without shadow, as if mantled with a rosy phosphorescence. And beyond them, where they stared in troubled and restless wonder, the darkness was illumed with the strange light.

Mad and unholy was the vision that I saw: for the harbor waves no longer lapped on the sand, and the sea had wholly vanished. The *Black Falcon* was gone, and where the reefs had been, great marble walls ascended, flushed as if with the ruby of lost sunsets. Above them were haughty domes of heathen temples, and spires of pagan palaces; and beneath were mighty streets and causeys where people passed in a never-ending throng. I thought that I gazed upon some immemorial city, such as had flourished in Earth's prime; and I saw the trees of its terraced gardens, fairer than the palms of Eden. Listening, I heard the sound of dulcimers that were sweet as the moaning of women; and the cry of horns that told forgotten glorious things; and the wild sweet singing of people who passed to some hidden, sacred festival within the walls.

I saw that the light poured upward from the city, and was born of its streets and buildings. It blinded the heavens above; and the horizon beyond was lost in a shining mist. One building there was, a high fane above the rest, from which the light streamed in a ruddier flood; and from its open portals music came, sorcerous and beguiling as the far voices of bygone years. And the revellers passed gayly into its portals, but none came forth. The weird music seemed to calle me and entice me; and I longed to tread the streets of the alien city, and a deep desire was upon me to mingle with its people and pass into the glowing fane.

Verily I knew why the drinkers had stared at the darkness and had muttered among themselves in wonder. I knew that they also longed to descend into the city. And I saw that a great causey, built of marble and gleaming with the red luster, ran downward from their very feet over meadows of unknown blossoms to the foremost buildings.

Then, as I watched and listened, the singing grew sweeter, the music stranger, and the rosy luster brightened. Then, with no backward glance, no word or gesture of injunction to his men, Captain Dwale went slowly forward, treading the marble causey like a dreamer who walks in his dream. And after him, one by one, Roger Aglone and the crew followed in the same manner, going toward the city.

Haply I too should have followed,

drawn by the witching music. For truly it seemed that I had trod the ways of that city in former time, and had known the things whereof the music told and the voices sang. Well did I remember why the people passed eternally into the fane, and why they came not forth; and there, it seemed, I should meet familiar and beloved faces, and take part in mysteries recalled from the foundered years.

All this, which the wine had remembered through its sleep in the ocean depths, was mine to behold and conceive for a moment. And well it was that I had drunk less of that evil and pagan vintage than the others, and was less besotted than they with its luring vision. For, even as Captain Dwale and his crew went toward the city, it appeared to me that the rosy glow began to fade a little. The walls took on a wavering thinness, and the domes grew insubstantial. The rose departed, the light was pale as a phosphor of the tomb; and the people went to and fro like phantoms, with a thin crying of ghostly horns and a ghostly singing. Dimly above the sunken causey the harbor waves returned; and Red Barnaby and his men walked down beneath them. Slowly the waters darkened above the fading spires and walls; and the midnight blackened upon the sea; and the city was lost like the vanished bubbles of wine.

A terror came upon me, knowing the fate of those others. I fled swiftly, stumbling in darkness toward the palmy hill that crowned the isle. No vestige remained of the rosy light; and the sky was filled with returning stars. And looking oceanward as I climbed the hill, I saw a lantern that burned on the *Black Falcon* in the harbor, and discerned the embers of our fire that smoldered on the sands. Then, praying with a fearful fervor, I waited for dawn.

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